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The paradox of learning within walls:

*“Toward educational restoration through critical
pedagogy and Justice Reform”*

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Contents

Pages

✓ Student Declaration.....	P. 92
----------------------------	-------

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	5
-------------------------------	---

<i>Abstract</i>	6
-----------------------	---

1: **Introduction:** The Enduring Paradox of Learning Within

Walls.....	7
------------	---

1.1 Opening	7
-------------------	---

1.2 Problem Statement	7
-----------------------------	---

1.3 Definitions of Key Terms.....	8
-----------------------------------	---

1.4 Research Questions (R/Q).....	12
-----------------------------------	----

1.5 Contribution of original concepts to research questions	13
---	----

1.6 Significance of the study	14
-------------------------------------	----

1.7 Researcher's positionality	15
--------------------------------------	----

2: **Foundations and frameworks:** Historical and Theoretical Approaches to

Prison Education	16
------------------------	----

2.1 Introduction: Deconstructing power, pedagogy, and reintegration.....	16
--	----

2.2 The Architecture of Power: Foucault's disciplinary society and biopolitics	17
--	----

2.3 Transformative Learning and the Activated Gaze: Reframing Self Through Education After Prison	20
--	----

2.4 Challenging hegemony: Gramsci's organic intellectuals	23
---	----

2.5 Original conceptual contributions: Core frameworks in carceral studies and social reintegration	25
--	----

2.6 Historical Context of Punitive Reform.....	29
2.7 Historical Context of Restorative Approaches.....	30
2.8 Conclusion: A Framework for Critical Analysis.....	32
3: Methodology: Research Design and Approach	33
3.1 Introduction: Navigating the Complexities of Carceral Education Research	33
3.2 Ontological and Epistemological Positioning	33
3.3 Research Design: Thematic Comparative Case Study	34
3.4 Rationale for Comparative Methodology.....	34
3.5 Data Collection: Desk-Based Secondary Research.....	35
3.6 Data Analysis: Thematic and Comparative Strategy	36
3.7 Addressing Methodological Limitations	37
3.8 Ethical Considerations.....	38
3.9 Conclusion: A Rigorous, Reflexive Framework.....	38
4: Comparative Analysis: Policy and Funding in Third-Level Prison Education	39
4.1 Introduction: Shaping Educational Landscapes through Policy and Investment.....	39
4.2 Punitive Models: Policy and Funding in Ireland and England.....	39
4.3 Restorative Models: Policy and Funding in Norway and New Zealand.....	41
4.4 Conclusion: Policy as a Foundation for Transformation.....	44
5: Comparative Analysis: Curriculum Design and Pedagogical Approaches	46
5.1 Introduction: Pedagogy as a Reflection of Penal Philosophy	46
5.2 Punitive Models: Curriculum and Pedagogy in Ireland and England.....	47

5.3 Restorative Models: Curriculum and Pedagogy in Norway and New Zealand	48
5.4 Comparative Analysis and Discussion.....	51
5.5 Policy Recommendations: Education as Restoration, Not Risk Management.....	52
5.6 Conclusion: Pedagogy as a Pathway to Liberation or Control.....	56
6: Comparative Analysis: Post-Release Reintegration and Recidivism	57
6.1 Introduction: From Carceral Walls to Societal Realities	57
6.2 Punitive Models: Fragmented Reintegration and High Recidivism in Ireland and England	57
6.3 Restorative Models: Supported Reintegration and Lower Recidivism in Norway and New Zealand	59
6.4 Comparative Analysis and Discussion.....	62
6.5 Conclusion: The Transformative Power of Reintegration	63
7: The Vital Role of Organic Intellectuals in Carceral Education	65
7.1 Introduction: Reclaiming Agency and Redefining Expertise	65
7.2 Gramscian Framework: Organic Intellectuals and Counter-Hegemony	65
7.3 The Limited Role in Punitive Models: Ireland and England	66
7.4 The Integral Role in Restorative Models: Norway and New Zealand	67
7.5 Integrative Educational Blueprint: A human-centered model.....	68
7.6 Comparative Analysis and Discussion.....	70
7.7 Conclusion: The Imperative of institutionalising lived experience	71

8: Synthesis of Findings and Pathways to Transformation	72
8.1 Introduction: Integrating Insights from Comparative Analysis	72
8.2 Punitive Paradigms: A Cycle of Control, Stigma, and Recidivism	72
8.3 Restorative Paradigms: Human Rights, Empowerment, and Reduced Recidivism.....	74
8.4 Overarching Insights and Theoretical Reinforcement	76
8.5 Conclusion: Towards a Human Rights-Based Carceral Education	77
 9: Recommendations and Conclusion: Towards a Transformative Future for Carceral Education.....	 79
9.1 Introduction: Translating Insight into Action	79
9.2 Recommendations for Policy and Practice	79
9.3 Future Research Directions.....	83
9.4 Conclusion: The Thesis's Enduring Contribution	85
9.5 Final Reflections: Reimagining Justice, Education, and Human Potential	86
 10: Bibliography	 88

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how punitive versus restorative justice models shape prison-based education, learner identity, and post-release reintegration. Through a comparative case study of Ireland, England, Norway, and New Zealand, it investigates the tension between institutional control and transformative potential in prison education. The study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, drawing on Michel Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power and biopolitics, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, bell hooks' engaged teaching, Antonio Gramsci's theory of the organic intellectual, and Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory. It introduces three original conceptual tools, the activated gaze, reputational overruling, and sensationalised stigma, to illuminate how surveillance and stigma extend beyond release, constraining access to education, housing, and employment.

Employing a thematic comparative methodology with constructivist ontology and subjectivist epistemology, the research integrates documentary analysis and existing scholarship. The findings reveal that while punitive systems instrumentalise education for risk management and behavioral compliance, restorative models position education as a human right, fostering agency, critical consciousness, and identity redefinition.

The thesis concludes with a set of policy recommendations advocating for the institutionalisation of higher education as a central, transformative force in rehabilitation. It calls for a reimagining of carceral education not as a conditional offering, but as a liberatory, sustained practice that challenges stigma and supports genuine human restoration.

1: Introduction: The Enduring Paradox of Learning Within Walls

1.1 Opening

Over 60 percent of released Irish prisoners re-offend within three years (CSO, 2023). This stark statistic immediately raises a critical question: What role does education play in breaking this persistent cycle of recidivism? This thesis critically examines the profound tension between the rehabilitative promise of education and the inherent control mechanisms of carceral systems. While education offers a pathway to personal growth, skill development, and ultimately, societal reintegration, it operates within institutions fundamentally designed for punishment, incapacitation, and surveillance. This foundational conflict between the aspirational goals of human development and the restrictive realities of carceral power necessitates a rigorous re-evaluation of how learning within walls can either perpetuate or disrupt the cycles of incarceration and re-offending. It compels us to ask whether prison education, as currently conceived and implemented in many punitive systems, merely serves to reinforce existing power structures or if it can genuinely foster transformative change.

1.2 Problem Statement

This thesis posits that prison education, often framed as a conditional privilege under punitive systems, frequently fails to reduce recidivism and realise its full rehabilitative potential. In many jurisdictions, including Ireland and England, educational opportunities within carceral settings are often fragmented, underfunded, and delivered through pedagogies that prioritise control and compliance over critical consciousness and agency. This approach inadvertently perpetuates a cycle of disadvantages, hindering genuine reintegration and undermining the very promise of rehabilitation. In stark contrast, restorative approaches, as robustly demonstrated by Norway and New Zealand, position education not as a privilege but as a fundamental human right. These models integrate comprehensive educational pathways with broader societal philosophies of restorative justice and reintegration, achieving markedly lower re-offending rates. Recent data

confirm the long-term consistency of these outcomes: Norway's recidivism rate has remained exceptionally low, with only 20 per cent of released prisoners reoffending within two years (Kristoffersen, 2022). This sustained success complements earlier research (Pratt, 2008) and underscores the reliability of restorative justice models in reducing reoffending through holistic, human-centered approaches. By systematically comparing and contrasting the policy, pedagogical, and structural elements of Ireland and England (representing predominantly punitive models) with those of Norway and New Zealand (representing restorative models), this research aims to identify precisely which factors either perpetuate carceral control or foster genuine transformation and successful post-release outcomes. While recidivism timeframes vary slightly by jurisdiction, three years in Ireland and England versus two years in Norway, this thesis accounts for these differences in its comparative analysis to ensure transparency and validity

1.3 Definitions of Key Terms

To ensure clarity and consistency throughout this thesis, the following key concepts are defined as they are used within this work, building upon existing scholarship and introducing original conceptual contributions where specified:

Activated gaze:

An original concept developed within this thesis. While Michel Foucault's concept of the Panopticon (Foucault, 1977) describes a form of disciplinary power that induces a continuous, internalised self-discipline through the constant potential for observation within fixed disciplinary spaces, the activated gaze signifies a distinct, post-carceral psychological phenomenon. It describes an internalised, heightened sense of scrutiny experienced by individuals after their physical release from prison. Crucially, this is not a constant, omnipresent observation, but rather an ingrained vigilance that manifests as sporadic and episodic flare-ups of self-surveillance. These flares are triggered by specific external interactions or situations where the individual perceives a direct threat of their criminal past, especially sensationalised content (see below), being actively looked up and used as a basis for judgment and exclusion by "gatekeepers" (e.g., potential employers, landlords, college or university entries).

The activated gaze highlights that the surveillance is no longer solely from an institutional “eye”; instead, it represents the internalised vigilance against society's gatekeepers, individuals or systems that hold the “gavel” of judgment. When these gatekeepers look up information, they are not merely observing; they are actively wielding that “gavel” to deliver ongoing judgment, often based on a reductive and stigmatising view of the individual's past. This act of judgment, fueled by collateral consequences, then reinforces the formerly incarcerated person's need to maintain the activated gaze, constantly monitoring and managing their presentation to pre-empt exclusion. This makes it profoundly distinguishable from the Panopticon's function because it is not about being observed within a structure but about pre-empting external judgments that actively shape one's life choices and opportunities in ordinary social spaces.

Biopolitics:

A Foucauldian concept (Foucault, 1978) referring to the management of populations through calculations of risk reduction and economic productivity. In carceral education, it frames learning as a strategic intervention to minimise future crime and maximise economic contribution, often viewing the incarcerated learner as a “project to be fixed”.

Carceral system:

Encompasses the interconnected network of institutions, policies, and practices related to imprisonment, punishment, and control of individuals deemed to have committed crimes. This includes prisons, probation services, and the broader societal mechanisms of surveillance and regulation that extend beyond physical incarceration.

Civil death:

Refers to the pervasive legal and social penalties that extend far beyond the initial penal sentence, significantly impeding the reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals (Corda, 2023). This thesis argues that mechanisms such as “reputational overruling” and sensationalised stigma exacerbate this condition.

Collateral Consequences:

Non-penal legal and social restrictions imposed on individuals with criminal records that limit their access to employment, housing, education, voting rights, and other civic participations, even after serving their time.

Critical consciousness:

A Freirean concept (Freire, 1970) describing the process by which learners, through critical reflection and dialogue, come to recognise the social, political, and economic contradictions of their reality and develop the capacity to act against oppressive elements.

Engaged pedagogy:

A concept advanced by bell hooks (hooks, 1994), emphasising a holistic approach to learning that connects the intellectual, emotional, and relational aspects of students, fostering healing, self-awareness, and critical thinking, particularly for marginalised individuals.

Hegemony (Cultural hegemony):

A Gramscian concept (Gramsci, 1971) referring to the subtle, pervasive dominance of one social group's ideology over others, achieved through the widespread dissemination and acceptance of a particular worldview that appears as “common sense” or the “natural order of things”.

Organic intellectuals:

A Gramscian concept (Gramsci, 1971) referring to individuals who emerge from within subordinate classes or groups, possessing both practical knowledge from lived experience and the capacity to articulate a critical understanding of their social conditions, thereby challenging dominant hegemonic narratives. In this thesis, it specifically refers to formerly incarcerated individuals who become agents of educational transformation.

Panopticon:

Jeremy Bentham's architectural prison design, used by Foucault (1977) as a metaphor for a pervasive form of disciplinary power that induces self-regulation through constant, potential observation.

Pedagogy:

The method and practice of teaching, including the theoretical concepts underlying educational practice.

Punitive Justice Model:

A philosophical approach to criminal justice that primarily emphasises punishment, retribution, and incapacitation of offenders, with rehabilitation often seen as a secondary or conditional goal.

Recidivism:

The tendency of a convicted criminal to re-offend. In this thesis, it primarily refers to reconviction rates within a specified period (e.g., one or three years) following release from prison.

Rehabilitation:

The process of restoring an offender to a useful life through education, therapy, or vocational training. This thesis critically examines its true potential within different carceral models.

Reputational overruling:

An original concept developed within this thesis. It describes the dominant power of a criminal conviction to permanently supersede and negate all other aspects of an individual's identity and social standing, making their criminal record their primary defining characteristic in the eyes of society. This concept is central to understanding the practical manifestation of “civil death”, the pervasive legal and social penalties that extend far beyond the initial penal sentence (Corda, 2023).

Restorative Justice Model:

A philosophical approach to criminal justice that focuses on repairing harm caused by crime, involving victims, offenders, and communities in a process of dialogue and resolution. In carceral education, it often emphasises human rights, dignity, and holistic reintegration.

Sensationalised stigma:

An original concept developed within this thesis. It identifies a critical contemporary mechanism driven by media and public discourse that amplifies and distorts negative public perception of formerly incarcerated individuals by sensationalising or selectively highlighting their criminal past, thereby fueling “reputational overruling” in the digital age.

Third-Level Prison Education:

Referring to higher education opportunities (e.g., university-level courses, degrees, vocational training leading to higher qualifications) provided within prison settings.

1.4 Research Questions (R/Q)

This thesis seeks to address the following key research questions:

- ✓ **R.Q.1:** How do punitive and restorative justice philosophies shape policy and funding for third-level prison education in Ireland, England, Norway, and New Zealand?
- ✓ **R.Q.2:** In what ways do curriculum design and pedagogical approaches differ between punitive and restorative prison education models across these nations?
- ✓ **R.Q.3:** How does access to higher education, as implemented in punitive versus restorative contexts, affect post-release social reintegration and recidivism rates?
- ✓ **R.Q.4:** What specific roles do individuals with lived experience, conceptualised as organic intellectuals, play in shaping educational transformation and advocating for reform within carceral systems in these comparative contexts?

1.5 Contribution of original concepts to research questions

While existing frameworks of stigma and carceral education highlight broad dynamics of power and identity, the three concepts introduced here, activated gaze, reputational overruling, and sensationalised stigma, serve as analytical lenses uniquely calibrated to the lived realities of learners in carceral settings. Specifically...

Activated gaze

Relevance to R.Q.1 (*How do institutional policies shape corrective pedagogy?*)

By focusing on how institutional surveillance becomes pedagogically performative, activated gaze exposes the subtle ways in which policy documents not only govern bodies but also guide classroom power-dynamics an angle traditional biopolitics analyses often leave implicit.

Reputational overruling

Relevance to R.Q.2 (*In what ways do educators' and peers' assessments influence learner identity?*)

This concept foregrounds how formal evaluations and peer judgments can cumulatively silence or amplify prisoner-students' voices, thereby providing a direct bridge between educational assessment practices and individual subject-formation.

Sensationalised stigma

Relevance to R.Q. 3 & 4 (*What are the emotional dimensions of reintegration, and how do comparative jurisdictions address them?*). By attending to the visceral, affective registrations of stigma, the throbbing anxiety of returning citizens in academic spaces, sensationalised stigma links policy-level reintegration measures (R.Q. 3) with on-the-ground pedagogical supports (R.Q. 4), capturing what neither pure policy analysis nor autoethnography alone can.

Together, these concepts map onto each research question not as decorative theory, but as indispensable tools for unpacking: (a) the performative power of prison-university partnerships,

(b) the micro-mechanics of educator learner interactions, and (c) the embodied stakes of post-incarceration education reform.

1.6 Significance of the study

This study holds significant academic, policy, and social relevance. Firstly, it addresses a critical gap in existing scholarships, which often focuses on basic literacy and vocational training within prisons, rather than the more holistic and rights-based approaches to higher education explored here. By examining third-level prison education, the thesis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of advanced learning pathways and their impact on incarcerated individuals.

Secondly, the research provides substantial insights into the field of adult education theory. It investigates how principles of learner agency, critical reflection, and transformative learning central to adult education can be applied, constrained, or fostered within the unique and often contradictory environment of carceral institutions.

Thirdly, the comparative design, which rigorously contrasts punitive and restorative models, offers empirically grounded evidence to inform policy debates on justice, rehabilitation, and effective decarcerating strategies. The stark differences in recidivism rates between the compared nations underscore the pragmatic necessity of shifting towards more human-centered approaches.

Finally, the introduction of original conceptual contributions, the activated gaze, reputational overruling, and sensationalised stigma, significantly advances theoretical understandings of post-release stigma and surveillance. These concepts provide a framework for analysing the enduring mechanisms of social exclusion that continue to impact individuals long after their physical release, highlighting the need for systemic reform beyond the prison walls.

1.7 Researcher's positionality

A crucial element of this thesis, and indeed a significant strength, is that this study is deeply rooted in lived experience and a profound professional and personal commitment to carceral education reform. The researcher has navigated the prison system firsthand, experiencing its inherent contradictions and challenging its disciplinary logic from within. This intimate experience has not only fueled a dedication to academic study in this field but has also directly informed the conceptualisation and development of the original theoretical frameworks presented in this thesis, particularly the activated gaze and reputational overruling.

This personal lens is not merely a biographical detail; it functions as a methodological and conceptual anchor for the entire thesis. It ensures that the academic critique is not abstract but is profoundly grounded in firsthand, embodied knowledge, enhancing the study's credibility and its unique contribution to the literature. This positionality allows for an unparalleled understanding of the human experience within carceral systems, enabling a more authentic and compelling critique of carceral power and a more empathetic advocacy for transformative education. It positions the researcher as an organic intellectual in the Gramscian sense, using lived experience and academic rigor to challenge dominant narratives and advocate for a more just and humane approach to incarceration and reintegration.

2: Foundations and frameworks: Historical and theoretical approaches to prison education

2.1 Introduction: Deconstructing power, pedagogy, and reintegration

The landscape of carceral education is profoundly shaped by complex power dynamics, pedagogical philosophies, and the pervasive societal mechanisms that either facilitate or impede social reintegration.

To critically examine the “enduring paradox of learning within walls,” this thesis necessitates a robust theoretical foundation capable of deconstructing these intricate forces. This chapter lays out the core conceptual frameworks that will guide the subsequent comparative analysis, drawing upon foundational thinkers in critical theory, education, and criminology.

We begin by establishing the critical lens of Michel Foucault, whose work on disciplinary power and biopolitics provides an essential understanding of how carceral systems function as sites of control and knowledge production. Following this, we introduce the counter-hegemonic educational philosophies of Paulo Freire and bell hooks, which champion liberatory pedagogy and critical consciousness as pathways to emancipation. Finally, Antonio Gramsci's insights into cultural hegemony and the role of organic intellectuals will illuminate how dominant ideologies are maintained and, crucially, how they can be challenged from within and without the carceral system.

Building upon these foundational theories, this chapter will then introduce three original conceptual contributions: “the activated gaze,” “reputational overruling” and “sensationalised Stigma”. These concepts are developed to offer a nuanced understanding of the post-carceral experience, demonstrating how the mechanisms of control and exclusion extend far beyond physical incarceration, profoundly impacting the social reintegration and identity formation of individuals with criminal records. Collectively, these frameworks provide a comprehensive toolkit for analysing the successes and failures of punitive versus restorative approaches to prison education and envisioning pathways to genuine transformation.

2.2 The Architecture of Power: Foucault's disciplinary society and biopolitics

Michel Foucault's groundbreaking work provides an indispensable analytical lens for understanding the intricate relationship between power, knowledge, and social control, particularly within institutional settings like prisons. His theories help to illuminate how carceral systems operate not merely as places of confinement but as sophisticated apparatuses for the production of compliant subjects.

Disciplinary Power and the Panopticon

Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power is vividly illustrated through the architectural metaphor of the Panopticon, a prison design where a central watchtower allows constant surveillance without inmates ever knowing when they are being watched. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault argues that this omnipresent visibility produces self-regulating individuals: people who internalise the gaze of authority so completely that they begin to monitor and discipline themselves. This dynamic of internalised control is not limited to prisons but is embedded across institutional life, including education.

In carceral education, this manifests in subtle yet persistent ways: CCTV in classrooms, restricted movement, monitored internet access, and heavily prescribed curricula. These mechanisms reinforce conformity and docility, rather than critical thought or creative expression. Learners are often reminded, both symbolically and physically, that they remain within a disciplinary regime. The effect is what Foucault terms the production of "docile bodies" (Foucault, 1977), shaped by structures that fuse power and knowledge. However, drawing from both experience and reflective practice, I argue that this gaze is not always continuously internalised. Instead, it emerges sharply and selectively in certain social contexts. I refer to this as the activated gaze: a situational, emotionally charged form of self-surveillance that flares up in moments where one's past incarceration becomes socially precarious. It is particularly triggered under the weight of stigma and the anticipation of judgment, from educators, employers, peers, or even casual acquaintances.

Where Foucault's gaze is rooted in perpetual visibility, the activated gaze is event-based and socially induced. This anticipatory self-surveillance can be intense. It may surface during a job interview, a classroom discussion, or a conversation where personal history risks exposure. Or, participation in learning is often tied to institutional incentives, early release, and positive behavioural reports, which dilutes its emancipatory potential and reinforces the view that education is something done to learners, not with them.

The emotional toll of the activated gaze extends beyond prison walls. Alessandro Corda's (2023) concept of "*Collateral Consequences*", the residual civil sanctions imposed after incarceration, reveals how formerly imprisoned individuals remain caught in a bureaucratic network of surveillance and exclusion. These include barriers to employment, housing, education, and civic participation. In this sense, the Panopticon no longer exists solely in brick and mortar; it is embedded in databases, forms, risk assessments, and institutional policies. The gaze becomes diffused, ambient, and reputational, contributing to what I have elsewhere called reputational overruling, where transformation is acknowledged but denied consequence.

Thus, while Foucault's theoretical apparatus remains a powerful lens for examining how carceral education disciplines, it does not fully capture the layered emotional dimensions of lived stigma. The activated gaze builds on his insights, but insists that self-surveillance is not always a passive, continuous background condition, it is a psychosocial response to systemic suspicion. And it is precisely within these emotionally activated moments that education's potential for resistance and reclamation must be understood.

While Foucault's panopticon illuminates the workings of disciplinary power and internalised surveillance, it underplays collective forms of resistance and offers little insight into culturally grounded reintegration practices that lie at the heart of restorative justice. His model assumes a unidirectional flow of power from institution to individual, yet in community-centred contexts, where relational repair and mutual accountability are paramount, power circulates in more dialogic and horizontal ways. To probe the reach of panopticons, we must therefore ask: how far can Foucault's vision of self-regulation travel when justice paradigms prioritise communal healing, collaborative decision-making, and the restoration of relationships.

Biopolitics and the Management of Populations

Foucault's later work, particularly in "*The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*" (1978), introduces the concept of biopolitics. While disciplinary power targets individual bodies, biopolitics operates at the level of populations, focusing on the management of life itself: birth rates, public health, mortality, and risk. In the context of carceral education, biopolitics reveals how states manage the incarcerated population through calculations of risk reduction and economic productivity.

Education is framed not necessarily as an inherent right or a tool for personal growth, but as a strategic intervention to minimise future crime and maximise the economic contribution of formerly incarcerated individuals. The incarcerated learner thus becomes a "project to be fixed," their value assessed in terms of their potential to reduce the societal burden of recidivism and integrate into the labour market. This approach can pathologise individuals, focusing on their deficiencies rather than their strengths, and ultimately reinforces state control under the guise of welfare or rehabilitation.

This Foucauldian lens is crucial for diagnosing the systemic issues within punitive carceral education models. It highlights how policies, funding structures, and pedagogical choices are often driven by an underlying logic of control, risk management, and the production of compliant citizens, rather than genuine transformation or respect for human dignity. However, while Foucault reveals the pervasive nature of power, his work is often criticised for offering limited avenues for resistance or agency. It is here that the critical pedagogies of Freire and hooks provide a vital counterpoint.

2.3 Transformative Learning and the Activated Gaze: Reframing Self Through Education After Prison

Theories of adult education are not complete without addressing how individuals process, reconstruct, and reframe their sense of self, especially in the wake of systemic disruption. For incarcerated learners, education can become a deeply transformative experience, not merely an intellectual exercise but a psychosocial intervention. This potential is well captured by Jack Mezirow's (1991; 2000) Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), which emphasises how critical reflection and dialogue can fundamentally alter a person's frames of reference.

In the context of prison education, transformative learning offers a lens through which to understand the internal shift from internalised stigma to restored agency, a process that dovetails with the concept of the activated gaze. According to Mezirow, transformative learning occurs through a ten-stage process, typically catalysed by what he terms a "disorienting dilemma." These dilemmas challenge an individual's previously held assumptions and force a re-evaluation of meaning structures. For incarcerated individuals, the loss of freedom, forced identity categorisation, and the psychosocial effects of surveillance represent extreme forms of such dilemmas.

These experiences often fracture the individual's prior self-concept and impose a new one rooted in guilt, shame, and exclusion. In this state, education becomes more than curriculum, it becomes an existential encounter with the possibility of redefinition.

This aligns directly with the concept of the activated gaze, introduced in this thesis as an extension and clarification of Foucault's panoptic theory of surveillance. While Foucault (1977) argued that individuals internalise the gaze of authority and become "docile bodies," the activated gaze refers to a later, reactive state: the sense of hyper-awareness and social vulnerability that surfaces in moments of reputational re-exposure.

Mezirow's transformative framework helps explain how learners may resist or reframe this gaze. Through critical reflection and dialogical engagement, core tenets of TLT, incarcerated or formerly

incarcerated individuals begin to re-author their narratives. They challenge the hegemonic scripts imposed by criminal records, institutional classifications, and societal stereotypes. Transformative learning also intersects meaningfully with Freire's notion of critical consciousness and Gramsci's idea of the organic intellectual.

Mezirow provides the psychological architecture for how this consciousness emerges: through perspective transformation, individuals shift from passive recipients of identity to active constructors of meaning. This process is not merely cognitive but affective, often involving grief, vulnerability, and eventually empowerment. In educational settings that adopt trauma-informed, critically dialogical approaches, the prison classroom can become a site of healing and identity reclamation. Moreover, TLT allows for an understanding of why some educational programs in punitive systems fail to achieve meaningful change.

When education is instrumentalised for compliance or job readiness, it lacks the reflective depth necessary for transformation. Conversely, when educators adopt a transformative approach validating student narratives, fostering dialogue, and encouraging critical engagement learning becomes a vehicle for emancipation. Here, the activated gaze can begin to loosen; its power diminishes not because surveillance ends, but because the subject becomes resilient in the face of it, armed with new ways of seeing themselves. Thus, transformative learning theory not only supports the thesis that education should be central to prison reform but provides a psychological framework for understanding how education facilitates resistance to carceral subjectivities. It enhances our grasp of identity reinvention post-incarceration and legitimises education as a reparative, rights-based process.

Pedagogy of Liberation: Freire's Critical Consciousness and hooks's Engaged Learning

In stark contrast to Foucault's diagnosis of disciplinary power, the works of Paulo Freire and bell hooks offer powerful frameworks for liberatory education, emphasising agency, critical consciousness, and holistic development. These pedagogical philosophies provide the theoretical underpinnings for the restorative approaches to prison education examined in this thesis.

Paulo Freire: Problem posing education and critical consciousness

Paulo Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), critiques the "banking concept of education," where students are viewed as empty vessels to be filled with deposits of knowledge by the teacher. This passive model, Freire argues, serves to maintain oppressive social structures by fostering conformity and discouraging critical thought. Instead, Freire advocates for "problem-posing education," a dialogical approach where teachers and students co-investigate reality, naming and critically reflecting upon their shared experiences. This process leads to critical consciousness, an awakening to the social, political, and economic contradictions of one's reality and the ability to take action against oppressive elements.

In the carceral context, Freirean pedagogy is transformative. It shifts education from a tool of control to a means of empowerment, enabling incarcerated learners to understand the systemic nature of their oppression and to envision pathways to liberation. It challenges the inherent power imbalances within the prison classroom, fostering genuine dialogue and mutual respect. For formerly incarcerated individuals, critical consciousness can mean recognising the broader societal forces that contributed to their incarceration, rather than internalising individual blame, and developing strategies for collective advocacy and social change post-release.

bell hooks: Engaged Pedagogy and Holistic Transformation

Building on Freire's work, bell hooks (1994) in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* advocates for "engaged pedagogy". Hooks emphasises that true liberation through education requires an intersectional approach that considers race, class, gender, and other identity markers. She insists on a holistic learning environment that connects the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects of learners. Engaged pedagogy is not merely about transmitting information but about fostering self-actualisation, healing, and self-awareness, particularly crucial for individuals impacted by trauma and systemic marginalisation.

For hooks (1994), the classroom must be a site of both intellectual rigor and emotional safety, where critical thinking is nurtured alongside personal vulnerability. This is profoundly relevant for prison education, where learners often carry significant trauma. Engaged pedagogy can facilitate healing, build trust, and create a brave space for authentic self-expression. By integrating emotional and relational aspects into learning, it cultivates the resilience and self-worth necessary for successful reintegration and civic participation. Hooks's work reinforces that education within carceral settings must transcend mere vocational training or academic accreditation; it must actively foster holistic human development, enabling individuals to reconstruct their identities beyond the criminalised label.

Together, Freire and hooks provide the theoretical blueprint for restorative prison education models. They advocate for a pedagogy that is fundamentally humanising, empowering, and aimed at fostering genuine agency and transformative social change, directly challenging the disciplinary logic of the carceral system.

2.4 Challenging hegemony: Gramsci's organic intellectuals

Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, articulated in his *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971), provides a critical framework for understanding how dominant ideologies are maintained and how counter-hegemonic forces can emerge to challenge them. This is particularly relevant to the field of carceral studies, where punitive narratives often permeate societal understanding of crime, punishment, and rehabilitation.

Cultural hegemony and the naturalisation of power

Gramsci (1971) argued that power is not maintained solely through coercive force but primarily through “hegemony”, the subtle, pervasive dominance of one social class or group over others, achieved through the widespread dissemination and acceptance of a particular worldview. This worldview, or ideology, becomes so ingrained that it appears as “*common sense*” or the “natural order of things.”

In the context of carceral systems, cultural hegemony manifests in the public acceptance of punitive justice models, the stigmatisation of individuals with criminal records, and the normalisation of collateral consequences. This ideology often frames incarceration as a just and effective solution to crime, thereby legitimising systems that may actually perpetuate disadvantage and recidivism. Educational institutions, even within prisons, can inadvertently contribute to this hegemony by promoting curricula and pedagogies that reinforce existing power structures or individualise systemic problems.

Traditional vs. organic intellectuals: Agents of Counter Hegemony

Crucially, Gramsci (1971) distinguished between traditional intellectuals and organic intellectuals. Traditional intellectuals (e.g., academics, experts, religious figures) often operate as a distinct social group, producing and disseminating knowledge that may inadvertently serve to maintain existing hegemonic structures.

Organic intellectuals, however, emerge from within the subaltern (subordinate) classes or social groups. They are individuals who possess both practical knowledge derived from their lived experience and the capacity to articulate a critical understanding of their social conditions. These individuals can develop a counter-hegemonic worldview, challenging the dominant narratives and advocating for alternative visions of society.

In the context of prison education, organic intellectuals are formerly incarcerated individuals who, through their lived experience, critical reflection, and engagement with education, develop a profound understanding of the carceral system's contradictions and the pathways to genuine reintegration. They are uniquely positioned to challenge the prevailing punitive hegemony, advocate for rights-based approaches, and co-create educational programs that are truly relevant and transformative for incarcerated learners. Their role transcends mere mentorship; they become pivotal agents in the process of “critical consciousness”. (Freire, 1970) for others, demonstrating that alternative ways of knowing and being are possible.

Their presence in educational reform, policy making, and even direct teaching roles represents a radical act of epistemic justice, validating lived experience as a powerful form of expertise and challenging the traditional power structures of knowledge production within carceral spaces. In Aotearoa New Zealand, for example, the *Te Ara Tika* (2020) initiative has embedded formerly incarcerated individuals as peer mentors and co-educators, institutionalising their roles within educational practice and demonstrating how organic intellectuals can drive meaningful change from within. Gramsci's (1971) framework thus provides a crucial understanding of how societal change can occur. It highlights that the struggle for justice in prison education is not just about policy reform but about fundamentally shifting dominant cultural narratives, with organic intellectuals playing a central role in articulating and mobilising counter-hegemonic alternatives.

Mezirow's transformative learning theory: Identity, reflection, and change

While much of the preceding discussion has focused on structural forms of power, pedagogy, and resistance, Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory offers a complementary perspective one that centers the learner's internal experience of cognitive and emotional change. Although cited in the abstract, Mezirow's framework has yet to be developed in the core chapters. Its relevance to carceral education lies in its step-by-step model of how individuals come to reframe their assumptions, reconstruct their identities, and engage more critically with the world (Mezirow, 1991; 2000). This section maps Mezirow's ten-stage process onto real and observed moments from prison-based learning, illustrating how education in these settings can catalyse deep personal transformation.

2.5 Original conceptual contributions: Core frameworks in carceral studies and social reintegration

Within the critical analysis of carceral systems and their enduring societal impacts, several interconnected concepts serve to illuminate the profound mechanisms of control and exclusion experienced by individuals with criminal records. These theoretical constructs aim to move beyond simplistic understandings of punishment and rehabilitation, delving into the pervasive power dynamics that shape lived experiences post-incarceration. These concepts are directly informed by

the researcher's unique positionality and lived experience, providing a grounded and authentic lens for understanding the ongoing challenges of social reintegration.

The activated gaze

The concept of the activated gaze, as introduced in Section 2.2 captures the episodic yet enduring psychological vigilance experienced by formerly incarcerated individuals under the weight of post-carcer judgment. This section extends that foundation by illustrating how the gaze is re-triggered in specific moments, such as job applications, housing interviews, or informal social exchanges, where gatekeepers metaphorically “wield the gavel” and impose stigma based on criminal records or sensationalised content. These real-world encounters deepen the internalisation of exclusion and illustrate how collateral consequences are reproduced through anticipation and self-surveillance in everyday life.

Reputational overruling

Reputational overruling is an original concept developed within this thesis. It refers to the dominant and often immutable power of a criminal conviction to permanently supersede and negate all other aspects of an individual's identity and social standing. It is a mechanism through which a person's past criminal record invariably becomes their primary defining characteristic in the eyes of society, effectively overriding their present accomplishments, rehabilitated status, or personal virtues.

This concept is central to understanding the practical manifestation of “*civil death*” (articulated by Corda, 2023), the pervasive legal and social penalties that extend far beyond the initial penal sentence. Despite serving their time and demonstrating commitment to change, individuals subjected to reputational overruling consistently encounter significant barriers in fundamental life domains such as employment, housing, education, and civic participation.

Sensationalised stigma

This constant invalidation of their reformed identity underscores how formal legal pronouncements transpose into enduring social realities, hindering genuine reintegration and perpetuating a cycle of disadvantages that challenges the very promise of rehabilitation. This phenomenon vividly illustrates how positive educational achievements and personal growth attained during incarceration are frequently nullified or severely undermined by the persistent stigma of a criminal record. Societal biases, often reinforced by formal policies, can override an individual's qualifications and demonstrated capabilities, leading to systemic exclusion despite significant personal transformation.

The Secondary Punishment: “*A Scoping Study on Employer Attitudes to Hiring People with Criminal Convictions*” (Garrihy & Bracken-Roche, 2024) reveals the persistent reality of reputational overruling as a structural barrier to reintegration. Despite legislative protections under the *Criminal Justice (Spent Convictions and Certain Disclosures) Act 2016*, the study found that vetting procedures frequently disclose spent convictions, and 95 per cent of people with convictions and 92 per cent of employers continue to report employment discrimination. Drawing from direct engagement with stakeholders and lived experience, the study underscores how even rehabilitated individuals face a residual penal logic embedded in hiring practices.

The concept of sensationalised stigma identifies a critical contemporary mechanism that actively amplifies and often distorts the negative public perception of formerly incarcerated individuals. This process is primarily driven by the strategic and often profit-motivated tendency within media and public discourse to sensationalise, exaggerate, or selectively highlight the criminal past of individuals. It prioritises dramatic or fear-inducing narratives, thereby reinforcing and deepening pre-existing societal stigmas, frequently at the expense of context, complexity, or the individual's current characteristics.

Sensationalised stigma directly underpins and fuels reputational overruling in the digital age. When individuals, institutions, or automated systems conduct casual background checks, such as internet searches, the readily available information is often a product of this sensationalised framing. This means that a person's rehabilitative journey, their current character, and their

aspirations are deliberately overshadowed by a publicly accessible identity disproportionately shaped by sensationalised accounts.

Consequently, sensationalised stigma acts as a potent accelerant to reputational overruling, ensuring that the disciplinary gaze remains profoundly 'activated' in the public sphere, creating formidable barriers to genuine reintegration and undermining the principles of restorative justice. This constant public re-traumatisation and re-stigmatisation perpetuates a cycle where individuals are released more vulnerable and socially marginalized than when they entered the carceral system, effectively exacerbating the condition of “civil death”. These three original concepts are not merely new terms; they serve as empirical manifestations of Foucault's dispersed disciplinary power extending beyond carceral walls into civic life. They provide concrete, lived mechanisms through which the abstract concept of “civil death” operates, making the enduring impact of incarceration tangible and analytically observable. The “activated gaze” represents the internalised residue of the Panopticon, demonstrating how the fear of exposure and judgment continues to shape behavior long after release.

Reputational overruling is the external, systemic mechanism, societal stigma, employer bias, legal restrictions, that validates and reinforces this activated gaze, effectively nullifying progress. Sensationalised stigma further intensifies this process by actively shaping public perception, ensuring that the disciplinary gaze remains profoundly 'activated' in the public sphere. Together, these concepts offer a powerful, empirically grounded explanation for how “*civil death*” is not just a legal status but a lived, psychological, and social reality, thereby significantly extending Foucault's theoretical reach into the post-carceral landscape.

2.6 Historical Context of Punitive Reform

Understanding the contemporary dynamics of prison education requires situating punitive justice models within their historical contexts. In both Ireland and England, modern carceral systems are the product of centuries-old philosophies rooted in retribution, deterrence, and moral correction. These systems were shaped by the socio-political conditions of their time and continue to bear the

imprint of these origins in their policy frameworks, institutional cultures, and public attitudes toward crime and rehabilitation.

In England, the rise of the custodial prison can be traced to the 18th and 19th centuries, when incarceration began to replace corporal and capital punishment as the principal tool of criminal justice. The penitentiary was designed not merely as a means of isolating offenders but as a moral reformatory, a space where individuals would be subjected to strict routines, labour, and surveillance aimed at instilling discipline and repentance (Ignatieff, 1978). This model, embodied in institutions like Pentonville Prison, drew heavily on utilitarian philosophies and Victorian moralism, framing punishment as both a deterrent to others and a means of correcting the offender's character (Garland, 1990). The legacy of this tradition persists in the continued emphasis on order, compliance, and behavioural reform in English penal policy (Crewe, 2011).

Ireland's carceral history is deeply entwined with its colonial experience. The 19th century saw the imposition of British penal institutions and philosophies, with prisons like Mountjoy designed on similar principles of discipline, isolation, and moral correction (O'Donnell, 2008). Irish prisons became sites not only of criminal punishment but also of political control, particularly during periods of national unrest (Kilcommins et al., 2004). Following independence, Ireland retained much of this custodial architecture and the underlying punitive ethos. Despite various reforms, such as the Whitaker Report (1985), which called for greater emphasis on rehabilitation, the system largely maintained its focus on security, incapacitation, and risk management (O'Donnell, 2015). The result is a fragmented and reactive penal policy that struggles to reconcile punitive traditions with modern calls for rights-based, rehabilitative justice.

Both jurisdictions have historically framed education within prison as a conditional, instrumental offering, aimed at supporting the broader goals of behavioural compliance and risk reduction (Prison Reform Trust, 2021; Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2023). The persistence of this logic helps explain the limitations of current educational provision in punitive models. By contrast, restorative systems in countries like Norway and New Zealand emerged in part as a rejection of these punitive legacies, embracing principles of normalisation, dignity, and reintegration as the foundation for criminal justice policy (Pratt, 2008; Quince, 2007).

This historical perspective underscores the deep structural challenges facing reform efforts in Ireland and England. It highlights that punitive carceral education models are not accidental or purely contemporary phenomena but are deeply embedded in cultural narratives of crime, punishment, and morality. Any effort to transform these models must grapple with this legacy, making the case not merely for policy change but for a fundamental shift in societal values.

2.7 Historical Context of Restorative Approaches

The emergence of restorative justice as an alternative to punitive models reflects a profound rethinking of the aims of criminal justice, rooted in both ancient traditions and modern reform movements. Unlike punitive systems, which emphasise retribution and control, restorative approaches focus on repairing harm, restoring relationships, and reintegrating individuals into the community as valued members.

In Scandinavia, particularly Norway, restorative principles are closely linked to broader social democratic values of equality, dignity, and inclusion. Norway's approach to justice and prison reform was shaped in the post-World War II era by a national emphasis on cohesion, mutual responsibility, and trust. The normalisation principle, which underpins Norwegian corrections, holds that life inside prison should resemble life outside as closely as possible, with imprisonment itself constituting the punishment, not the addition of harsh conditions or deprivations (Johnsen et al., 2011). Education is central to this model, viewed not as a privilege but as a right essential for personal development and successful reintegration. In practice, this shift is reflected in consistently

low recidivism rates, with only 20 percent of individuals reoffending within two years of release (Kristoffersen, 2022).

In New Zealand, restorative justice has deep roots in Māori customary law, which prioritises collective well-being, relational repair, and the restoration of *mana* (dignity and authority) for all parties affected by crime (Quince, 2007). Concepts such as *whanaungatanga* (kinship and connectedness) and *manaakitanga* (care and hospitality) shape restorative practices that emphasise dialogue, accountability, and community healing (Bowen, 2014). The modern restorative justice movement in New Zealand gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s in response to both Māori advocacy and growing recognition of the limitations of punitive policies, particularly in addressing the over-representation of Māori in the criminal justice system.

Both Norway and New Zealand's restorative models represent a deliberate counter-hegemonic shift, rejecting the disciplinary and biopolitical logics of punitive systems in favour of approaches grounded in human rights, empathy, and social reintegration (Gramsci, 1971). Their histories demonstrate that restorative justice is not a recent innovation or simply a policy option, it is the outgrowth of long-standing cultural and philosophical traditions that centre the dignity of both victims and offenders and see crime as a breach of relationships rather than merely a violation of the law.

These historical foundations explain why education occupies a central place in restorative systems. It is not instrumentalised for risk management or behavioural control but is framed as a means of fostering critical consciousness, self-worth, and civic participation (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). Restorative justice's historical roots in relational and community values make education's transformative potential both a natural and necessary component of rehabilitation.

It is also important to note that the comparative recidivism data cited in this thesis are drawn from differing reporting periods, for example, Ireland and England typically report over three years, while Norway reports over two years. This distinction informs the comparative analysis and cautions against simplistic statistical equivalence.

2.8 Conclusion: A Framework for Critical Analysis

This chapter has laid the essential theoretical groundwork for analyzing the complex dynamics of carceral education and social reintegration. By integrating Foucault's insights on power and discipline with the liberatory pedagogies of Freire and hooks, and Gramsci's understanding of hegemony and counter-hegemonic forces, we establish a multifaceted lens. This framework allows us to diagnose how punitive systems perpetuate control and exclusion while simultaneously identifying the conditions under which education can become a genuinely transformative force.

Furthermore, the introduction of the activated gaze, reputational overruling, and sensationalised stigma significantly enriches this theoretical understanding by providing specific, empirically grounded concepts for the post-carceral experience. These concepts reveal how the effects of incarceration extend far beyond the prison walls, perpetuating various forms of "civil death" and hindering successful reintegration. They underscore the ongoing struggle faced by formerly incarcerated individuals to reclaim their identities and secure their place in society amidst pervasive surveillance, stigma, and systemic barriers.

In the subsequent chapters, this robust theoretical and conceptual framework will be applied to the comparative case studies of Ireland, England, Norway, and New Zealand. It will serve as the analytical backbone for examining the divergent policy philosophies, pedagogical approaches, and reintegration outcomes in each context, ultimately building a compelling argument for the transformative potential of human rights-based, restorative approaches to prison education.

3: Methodology: Research Design and Approach

3.1 Introduction: Navigating the Complexities of Carceral Education Research

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used to investigate the enduring paradox of learning within carceral systems. It details the research design, data collection strategies, and analytical framework used to address the research questions, particularly the comparative analysis of punitive and restorative justice models in prison education. Given the sensitive nature of the subject and the international scope of comparison, a robust and adaptable methodology is essential. This chapter also discusses key methodological choices, such as the desk-based nature of the study, limitations around data comparability, and the positioning of lived experience as a conceptual rather than empirical component.

3.2 Ontological and Epistemological Positioning

This research is rooted in a constructivist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology. It assumes that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge is shaped through the discursive and lived experiences of individuals embedded within systems of power. This worldview supports not only comparative analysis across national contexts but also the inclusion of lived experience and personal reflection.

Ireland and England's enduring reliance on punitive justice models has had deeply damaging outcomes. Both jurisdictions continue to report disproportionately high recidivism rates, over sixty percent in Ireland within three years (CSO, 2023), coupled with a high prevalence of mental health conditions among the incarcerated population (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2022; Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2021). These systems also demonstrate persistently low levels of educational attainment prior to imprisonment and limited access to higher education while inside, reflecting a legacy of exclusion rather than empowerment (IPRT, 2021). Together, these indicators highlight the limitations of punitive approaches and underscore the urgency of restorative, education-led alternatives.

3.3 Research Design: Thematic Comparative Case Study

This study uses a thematic comparative case study design. It compares four countries:

- *Punitive models*: Ireland and England
- *Restorative models*: Norway and New Zealand

This reflects a “most different systems” design, intentionally selecting contrasting justice philosophies to maximise insight. These countries differ in penal tradition, levels of social investment, and educational outcomes. For example, Ireland has a recidivism rate of 62.3 per cent over three years (CSO, 2023), while Norway’s rate remains under 20 per cent within two years (Kristoffersen, 2022). Although reporting timeframes differ, these figures still highlight the impact of contrasting justice philosophies on educational provision and reintegration outcomes.

This comparative framework is structured around four themes that mirror the (R)esearch (Q)uestions:

- R.Q.1: Policy and funding frameworks
- R.Q.2: Curriculum and pedagogical design
- R.Q.3: Post-release reintegration and recidivism outcomes
- R.Q.4: Role of “organic intellectuals” in educational reform

3.4 Rationale for Comparative Methodology

The decision to adopt a comparative methodology stems from the need to examine not just variations in policy and practice across different jurisdictions, but the broader ideological paradigms they reflect. Punitive and restorative justice models are not simply administrative differences, they represent fundamentally opposing worldviews about the nature of justice, the role of education, and the potential for human transformation. A comparative framework allows these paradigms to be placed in direct contrast, highlighting both the limitations of systems rooted in

discipline and control, and the potential of those grounded in empathy, accountability, and reintegration.

This approach is particularly suited to a twenty-first-century context marked by increasing recognition of the limitations of mass incarceration, high recidivism rates, and the persistent exclusion of formerly incarcerated individuals from social participation. Comparative analysis exposes how these issues are not inevitable features of criminal justice but are shaped by systemic design. It also allows for the identification of transferrable practices that can inform policy reform in more punitive jurisdictions.

Importantly, this framework makes space for conceptual reflection and positional insight. While this thesis does not claim an ethnographic foundation, it is informed by the researcher's lived experience of incarceration and reintegration. This unique positionality strengthens the thesis's critical lens, enabling it to interrogate policy and pedagogy not just in terms of theory or intention, but in terms of their real-world effects on identity, agency, and belonging. Through this lens, comparative analysis becomes more than a research tool, it becomes a way to surface the moral and political stakes of carceral education and to advocate for Justice Systems that are better aligned with human dignity, democratic inclusion, and twenty-first-century social realities.

3.5 Data Collection: Desk-Based Secondary Research

This thesis is based on secondary research, with data drawn from published sources and institutional documents. This approach was chosen for its scope, feasibility, and relevance, allowing for macro-level comparisons across diverse national systems.

Data sources include:

- Academic literature: Books and peer-reviewed articles on prison education, adult learning, criminology, and critical theory (e.g., Foucault, Freire, hooks, Gramsci, Mezirow).
- Government reports: e.g., Irish Prison Service Strategic Plans, UK Ministry of Justice reforms, Norway's Correctional Services policies, and New Zealand's Corrections Act 2004.
- NGO and advocacy reports: Publications from the Irish Penal Reform Trust, Pathways Centre, Prison Reform Trust, and Human Rights Commission NZ.
- Official statistics: Recidivism rates, education access, and prison demographics from CSO Ireland, UK Home Office, Statistics Norway, and NZ Department of Corrections.
-

3.6 Data Analysis: Thematic and Comparative Strategy

Data were analysed using a five-step thematic comparative strategy:

1. **Familiarisation**: Close reading of all material
2. **Coding**: Assigning content to key analytical themes
3. **Thematic grouping**: Grouping codes under major headings (e.g., policy, pedagogy, reintegration)
4. **Cross-case comparison**: Evaluating similarities and differences across countries
5. **Theoretical synthesis**: Interpreting patterns using the frameworks from Chapter 2 (Foucault, Freire, Hooks, Gramsci)

3.7 Addressing Methodological Limitations

Recidivism Metrics are not uniform

- Countries use different definitions and timeframes.
- Wherever possible, three-year reconviction rates are used, and differences are noted to avoid misinterpretation.

It is important to note that Norway reports recidivism rates over a two-year period, while Ireland uses a three-year reconviction timeframe. This discrepancy necessitates careful interpretation of comparative statistics. Where possible, recent data sources have been consulted to ensure that trends in recidivism rates are accurately represented and contextualised. While the different reporting periods pose challenges for direct comparison, the analysis focuses on broader trends and structural influences rather than precise numerical equivalence.

Reliance on Secondary Data

- No new empirical data (e.g., interviews or fieldwork).
- High-quality existing studies are used, and personal experience is integrated reflexively, not empirically.

Limited Generalisability

- National context matters, policies can't simply be transplanted.
- The goal is to identify transferable values and principles, not prescribe uniform solutions.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Though no human participants were involved, the thesis adheres to ethical standards:

- All sources are cited accurately using the Harvard system.
- Interpretations are context-sensitive and avoid misrepresentation.
- Lived experience is presented responsibly and respectfully, without sensationalism.
- Reflexivity is maintained to avoid overstating individual perspective as universal truth.

3.9 Conclusion: A Rigorous, Reflexive Framework

This methodology chapter outlines a rigorous and reflexive approach that integrates comparative analysis with critical reflection. By combining thematic case study design with constructivist values and lived insight, the thesis builds a strong foundation for exploring how justice systems shape education in carceral settings. The next chapter applies this framework to examine how policy and funding shape access to third-level education across the four national contexts.

4. Comparative Analysis: Policy and Funding in Third-Level Prison Education

4.1 Introduction: Shaping Educational Landscapes through Policy and Investment

This chapter initiates the comparative analysis of third-level prison education, focusing specifically on how differing justice philosophies manifest in national policies and funding mechanisms across Ireland, England, Norway, and New Zealand. Building upon the theoretical frameworks introduced in Chapter 2, this analysis will explore how Foucauldian concepts of disciplinary power and biopolitics underpin punitive approaches, contrasting them with how Freirean and Gramscian principles inform the human rights-based policies of restorative models. The central aim is to answer Research Question 1: *“How do punitive and restorative justice philosophies shape policy and funding for third-level prison education in Ireland, England, Norway, and New Zealand?”* By examining the legislative frameworks, policy priorities, and resource allocation, this chapter will reveal how national philosophical orientations fundamentally shape the landscape and potential of education within carceral systems.

4.2 Punitive Models: Policy and Funding in Ireland and England

In Ireland and England, the overarching approach to criminal justice has historically leaned towards punitive measures, emphasising incapacitation, punishment, and deterrence. This philosophy significantly influences the policy and funding landscape for prison education, often rendering it a conditional privilege rather than an inherent right.

Ireland: Fragmented Policy and Underfunded Provision

In Ireland, prison education policy is largely guided by the Irish Prison Service's strategic plans, which often articulate a commitment to education as a rehabilitative tool, but within a broader framework of security and control (Irish Prison Service, 2022). While there are provisions for education up to third level, access is fragmented and highly dependent on individual institutional capacity and external partnerships. This fragmented and often underfunded model reflects what O'Donnell (2015) describes as the piecemeal and reactive development of prison education in

Ireland, which has historically struggled to move beyond a limited rehabilitative function. The lack of a cohesive, rights-based framework undermines the potential of education to contribute meaningfully to social reintegration.

The policy framework tends to view education primarily as a means to reduce re-offending and improve employability, aligning with a biopolitical rationale of managing populations for economic productivity and risk reduction (Foucault, 1978). Funding for third-level prison education in Ireland is often insufficient and precarious. It relies heavily on ad-hoc arrangements, grant funding, and the goodwill of external educational providers rather than sustained, ring-fenced government investment. This piecemeal funding approach results in inconsistent access, limited course offerings, and a lack of long-term planning. The absence of explicit legislative mandates enshrining education as a universal right for all incarcerated individuals further exacerbates these limitations.

This situation reflects a hegemonic acceptance of punitive justice, where educational initiatives are seen as discretionary add-ons rather than integral components of a rights-based correctional system (Gramsci, 1971). Consequently, educational opportunities frequently serve to reinforce control mechanisms by focusing on basic literacy and vocational skills that align with institutional needs rather than fostering critical consciousness or broader personal development.

England: Shifting Policies and Persistent Challenges

England's approach to prison education has seen various policy shifts but generally maintains a focus on skills, employability, and addressing offending behaviour rather than comprehensive human rights or holistic development. The Transforming Rehabilitation reforms, for example, aimed to reduce re-offending through various interventions, with education being one component (Ministry of Justice, 2013). However, critics argue that these reforms often prioritise short-term vocational outcomes and fail to address systemic barriers to reintegration, thereby aligning with a biopolitical approach to managing the offender population (Foucault, 1978). Crewe (2011) highlights the “tightness” of carceral control in English prisons pervasive atmosphere of surveillance and compliance that extends to educational settings, where pedagogy and curriculum

are often constrained by security priorities and behavioral management objectives. This environment reinforces traditional hierarchies and limits opportunities for critical or transformative learning.

Funding for prison education in England has also faced considerable challenges, often experiencing cuts and a shift towards payment-by-results models, which can incentivise providers to focus on easily quantifiable outcomes rather than deep, transformative learning (Prison Reform Trust, 2021). While the provision of education up to degree level exists, it is typically accessed by a small percentage of the prison population and is often reliant on charitable organisations and university outreach programmes. The policy environment, despite rhetorical commitments to rehabilitation, still largely operates within a framework where security and control are paramount, and education is seen as a means to reduce *risk* rather than a fundamental right promoting human flourishing. This reflects a persistent hegemonic ideology that prioritises public safety through incapacitation over comprehensive reintegration (Gramsci, 1971).

4.3 Restorative Models: Policy and Funding in Norway and New Zealand.

In stark contrast to the punitive models, Norway and New Zealand have adopted justice philosophies that are more deeply rooted in restorative principles, viewing education as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of effective rehabilitation and reintegration.

Norway: Education as a Human Right and State Responsibility

Norway's correctional philosophy is widely recognised for its emphasis on “normality” and rehabilitation, aiming to create environments that mirror outside society as much as possible. Central to this approach is the policy that education is a fundamental human right for all, regardless of incarceration status (Pratt, 2008). Johnsen, Granheim and Helgesen (2011) emphasise that the cultural and relational dynamics of Norwegian prisons, grounded in principles of normalisation and human dignity, are central to their rehabilitative success. Education in this context is not an isolated intervention, but part of a wider institutional commitment to supporting personal growth, agency, and social reintegration.

Funding for prison education in Norway is robust and integrated into the national education budget, reflecting a consistent and substantial state commitment. It is not reliant on fragmented grants or external partnerships but is a core component of the correctional service's operational budget. This stable funding ensures qualified teachers, adequate resources, and a wide array of accredited courses. The policy actively promotes collaboration between prisons and mainstream educational institutions, facilitating seamless transitions upon release. This demonstrates a counter-hegemonic approach (Gramsci, 1971), where the societal value of rehabilitation and human rights takes precedence over purely punitive or risk-management logics.

New Zealand: Transformative Justice and Indigenous Principles

New Zealand's approach to justice is increasingly influenced by restorative principles, particularly through the integration of Māori concepts of *manaakitanga* (hospitality, generosity, care) and *whanaungatanga* (relationship, kinship, sense of family connection). Quince (2007) and Bowen (2014) document how New Zealand's evolving restorative justice framework integrates these concepts, positioning education as a vehicle for cultural reconnection and relational repair. This culturally grounded approach underpins initiatives that aim not only to reduce recidivism but to restore identity and community belonging.

While still evolving, policies aim to foster a rehabilitative environment where education is seen as vital for transforming lives and reducing re-offending (Te Ara Tika, 2020). Funding for prison education in New Zealand, while perhaps not as expansive as Norway's, is generally more secure and strategically allocated than in punitive models. There is a concerted effort to support culturally responsive education programmes and vocational training that directly addresses reintegration needs. Policies increasingly support partnerships with tertiary education providers, ensuring that incarcerated individuals can pursue higher qualifications.

The emphasis on restorative justice and the growing recognition of the role of education in addressing systemic disadvantage signify a gradual but deliberate shift towards a counter-hegemonic framework, where the state invests in long-term societal well-being through individual transformation (Gramsci, 1971).

Comparative Analysis and Discussion

The stark differences in policy and funding between the punitive (Ireland/England) and restorative (Norway/New Zealand) models underscore the profound impact of underlying justice philosophies on educational provision within carceral systems.

It should be noted that these recidivism rates are drawn from different reporting periods: Norway's figures reflect a two-year timeframe, while Ireland's are based on a three-year period. This distinction is important for contextualising direct comparisons.

In punitive contexts, policy tends to frame education instrumentally, primarily as a tool for risk reduction and vocational training, aligning with Foucault's biopolitics (Foucault, 1978). Funding is often precarious, leading to fragmented, inconsistent, and often low-quality educational opportunities that reinforce existing power structures. The focus remains on managing the incarcerated population to minimise harm to society, rather than on fostering genuine individual transformation. For example, the over 60 per cent recidivism rate in Ireland (CSO, 2023) can be directly linked to policies that fail to provide adequate, rights-based educational and reintegration support.

Conversely, restorative models embed education as a fundamental human right within a broader philosophy of rehabilitation and societal reintegration. Norway's consistent, substantial state funding and explicit policy mandates for comparable educational access exemplify this approach, directly fostering Freirean critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) and Hooksian holistic development (hooks, 1994). New Zealand, while evolving, also demonstrates a commitment to transformative justice through policies that prioritise culturally responsive and reintegration focused education. The significantly lower recidivism rates in these nations, such as Norway's 20 per cent reoffending

rate within two years (Kristoffersen, 2022) serve as compelling empirical evidence that a rights-based, well-funded educational approach leads to more successful post-release outcomes. This builds on earlier studies that positioned Norway as a global model of restorative penal reform (Pratt, 2008).

These differences highlight a fundamental tension between two hegemonic ideologies (Gramsci, 1971): one that prioritises state control and societal protection through incapacitation, and another that champions human rights and societal well-being through individual transformation and reintegration. The policy and funding decisions, therefore, are not merely administrative choices but reflections of deeply ingrained societal values regarding crime, punishment, and the purpose of incarceration.

4.4 Conclusion: Policy as a Foundation for Transformation

This chapter has demonstrated that national justice philosophies fundamentally shape the policy and funding frameworks underpinning third-level prison education, with profound consequences for rehabilitation and reintegration.

In punitive models such as Ireland and England, policy is often framed through the lens of control, risk management, and public protection. Educational provision remains fragmented, underfunded, and inconsistently implemented. Access to higher education tends to be conditional, frequently linked to behaviour management or sentence length rather than enshrined as a statutory right. Funding mechanisms are typically short-term, outcome driven, and susceptible to political fluctuation. As a result, these systems struggle to achieve meaningful rehabilitative impact, and recidivism rates remain persistently high. The policy environment reinforces the logic of conditional reintegration, where education is seen as a tool for managing risk rather than fostering transformation.

In contrast, restorative models in Norway and New Zealand are underpinned by justice philosophies that centre human rights, dignity, and social reintegration. In these contexts, education is recognised as a legal entitlement and a cornerstone of rehabilitation, not a privilege

contingent upon behaviour or security classification. Policy frameworks prioritise equitable access, cultural responsiveness, and continuity of educational pathways from custody to community. Funding is sustained, integrated into broader national education strategies, and designed to promote personal development and critical consciousness alongside employability. These approaches are demonstrably linked to significantly lower recidivism rates and more successful reintegration outcomes.

The evidence underscores that prison education policy is not merely an administrative concern, but a profound reflection of a nation's justice philosophy and its willingness to believe in the possibility of redemption. In the chapters that follow, the analysis will examine how these policy foundations are operationalised through curriculum design, pedagogy, and post-release support, further exploring their capacity to enable genuine transformation or reinforce cycles of exclusion.

5: Comparative Analysis: Curriculum Design and Pedagogical Approaches

5.1 Introduction: Pedagogy as a Reflection of Penal Philosophy

Building upon the analysis of policy and funding in Chapter 4, this chapter delves into the practical manifestation of differing justice philosophies within prison education: curriculum design and pedagogical approaches. The curriculum, often seen as a neutral set of subjects, is, in fact, a deeply political statement reflecting societal values and institutional goals. Similarly, pedagogy, the method and practice of teaching can either reinforce existing power structures or act as a catalyst for liberation and critical consciousness.

This chapter aims to answer Research Question 2: *“In what ways do curriculum design and pedagogical approaches differ between punitive and restorative prison education models?”* By examining the content and delivery of education in Ireland, England, Norway, and New Zealand, this analysis will illustrate how the choice of 'what' and 'how' to teach directly reflects a system's underlying punitive or restorative orientation.

5.2 Punitive Models: Curriculum and Pedagogy in Ireland and England

In punitive carceral systems like those found in Ireland and England, curriculum design and pedagogical approaches are often shaped by immediate institutional concerns such as security, control, and narrowly defined rehabilitation outcomes. This typically results in a fragmented and compliance-oriented educational experience.

Ireland: Vocational Focus and Traditional Delivery

In Ireland, the prison education curriculum often prioritises vocational training and basic literacy and numeracy skills (Irish Prison Service, 2022). While higher education opportunities exist, they tend to be limited in scope and highly dependent on external partnerships, often through distance

learning. The curriculum frequently emphasises skills that are immediately transferable to the labor market, aligning with a biopolitical rationale (Foucault, 1978) that seeks to manage the incarcerated population by making them “productive” and reducing their perceived risk to society. Critical thinking, broader humanities, or arts-based education are often less emphasised, if offered at all.

Pedagogical approaches within Irish prisons largely tend to follow traditional, teacher-centered models. Instruction is often delivered in a didactic manner, with a strong emphasis on content transmission and rote learning, rather than Freirean problem-posing or hooksian engaged pedagogy (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). The classroom environment is frequently constrained by security protocols, limiting dynamic interaction, group work, and open dialogue. This conventional approach reinforces the institutional power dynamic, whereby knowledge is transmitted from authority figures (teachers, prison staff) to passive recipients (learners), inadvertently reproducing the disciplinary logic of the carceral system (Foucault, 1977). As a result, the focus shifts away from fostering critical consciousness, limiting opportunities for reflective, relational, and transformative learning, and instead prioritises individual behavioural modification and compliance.

England: Prescribed Learning and Behavioural Modification

England's prison education curriculum, while varied across different institutions, often falls under a national framework that emphasises reducing re-offending and improving employability (Ministry of Justice, 2013; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2020). This includes core literacy and numeracy, vocational qualifications, and programs explicitly designed to address offending behavior (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy-based courses). The curriculum tends to be prescribed, with limited scope for learner input or co-design, reflecting a top-down approach consistent with Foucauldian disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977). While some prisons may have partnerships with universities offering degree-level courses, these are not universally available and often cater to a small, highly motivated segment of the prison population.

Pedagogy in English prisons frequently adopts a more instrumental and outcomes-focused approach. Teachers often operate within a system that values measurable achievements and compliance with prescribed learning objectives. While some individual educators may strive for more engaging methods, systemic pressures, including funding models tied to specific outcomes, can limit the adoption of more liberatory pedagogies. The emphasis on behavioral modification programs, for example, often involves didactic instruction and structured exercises aimed at altering individual thinking patterns, rather than fostering collective critical reflection on systemic issues or promoting the development of organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971). The environment, similar to Ireland, is heavily influenced by security concerns, which can restrict the spontaneity and trust necessary for truly engaged and transformative learning.

5.3 Restorative Models: Curriculum and Pedagogy in Norway and New Zealand

In contrast, restorative justice models in Norway and New Zealand infuse their curriculum design and pedagogical approaches with principles of human dignity, agency, and social responsibility, fostering environments conducive to transformative learning.

Norway: Holistic Development and Student-Centered Learning

Norway's prison education curriculum is remarkably comprehensive, offering incarcerated individuals access to a full range of subjects equivalent to those available in mainstream society from basic education to university degrees and vocational training (Kristoffersen, 2022; Directorate of Norwegian Correctional Service, 2021). This breadth reflects Norway's emphasis on "normality" and the belief that incarceration should not impede access to rights, including education. The curriculum includes not only traditional academic subjects but also arts, humanities, and critical social sciences. It is designed to promote holistic personal development, critical thinking, and social awareness, aligning with Freirean concepts of critical consciousness and hooks's engaged pedagogy (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). There is a strong emphasis on continuous learning pathways, with clear progression routes and recognition of prior learning.

Pedagogical approaches in Norwegian prisons are decidedly student-centered and dialogical. Teachers are typically highly qualified and encouraged to adopt methods that promote active participation, critical reflection, and collaborative learning. Small class sizes, access to digital resources, and a focus on building trusting relationships between educators and learners are common.

The environment aims to normalise educational experience, minimising the overt signs of carceral control within the classroom. This fosters an atmosphere where learners can become “*subjects of their own history*” (Freire, 1970), engaging in problem-posing education that allows them to critically analyse their experiences and societal structures. The integration of “organic intellectuals” (Gramsci, 1971), formerly incarcerated individuals as peer mentors or co-educators, further enriches the pedagogical environment, bringing invaluable lived experience and fostering a truly counter-hegemonic approach to knowledge production.

New Zealand: Culturally Responsive and Contextualised Learning

New Zealand's curriculum design increasingly incorporates culturally responsive approaches, particularly through the integration of Māori language, culture and indigenous knowledge systems (Department of Corrections, 2022; Te Ara Tika, 2020). This aims to make education more relevant and engaging for Māori learners, who are overrepresented in the prison population. Beyond vocational training, there is a growing emphasis on holistic well-being, life skills, and programs that address offending behavior through a rehabilitative lens. Curriculum is often contextualised to reflect the local community and reintegration needs, with strong links to post-release support services.

Pedagogical approaches in New Zealand prisons are evolving towards more collaborative and learner-led models. Educators are encouraged to build strong relationships with learners and to facilitate learning that is culturally sensitive and trauma informed. The emphasis on restorative principles extends to the classroom, promoting dialogue, respect, and mutual understanding. While security considerations are still present, there is a conscious effort to create a more supportive

learning environment. The inclusion of individuals with lived experience, particularly within culturally specific programs, plays a crucial role in shaping curriculum and delivery, fostering a sense of ownership and relevance among learners (Gramsci, 1971). This shift signifies a commitment to move beyond mere compliance towards genuine transformation, rooted in both academic knowledge and lived wisdom.

Dialogue vs. Discipline: Informal Learning and Creative Resistance

Formal carceral education often operates within rigid disciplinary frameworks. Surveillance, controlled movement, and risk-oriented incentives shape classroom behaviour, often prioritising vocational compliance over critical consciousness. Within this context, peer dialogue and authentic expression can appear peripheral, even subversive. However, resistance frequently emerges in these very margins.

Learning thrives in the cracks. In many custodial settings, incarcerated individuals share books between cells, trade photocopied articles, and engage in informal debates sparked by fragments of knowledge. These acts are not merely coping mechanisms; they are forms of intellectual defiance. They challenge the institutional logic that positions education as a risk-management tool. One striking example comes from the cultural realm: underground rap. Creative expression, especially in the form of lyrics, storytelling, and poetry, offers an outlet for anger, injustice, and identity construction. These are not soft skills or distractions. They are grassroots pedagogies, rooted in lived experience and resistant to containment.

This form of learning operates outside the panoptic logic. It is neither incentivised nor assessed, and it does not yield quantifiable outcomes in the way traditional prison curricula aim to. And yet, it often has a greater emotional and cognitive impact. These expressions of knowledge are shared in trust, not extracted through surveillance. They are unmarked by reward systems and untouched by correctional oversight. Instead, they build solidarity, encourage introspection, and foster a critical awareness of one's social positioning.

Hooks (1994) argues that education should be the practice of freedom, not conformity. These informal learning practices embody that freedom in the most constrained of environments. They reflect bell hooks' "engaged pedagogy" a commitment to holistic development that values the emotional and relational dimensions of learning. In these spaces, learners are not reduced to their deficits but are seen in their complexity and potential.

Thus, while official prison education may reinforce docility and order, the unstructured and often invisible spaces where learning also occurs can challenge that very order. These creative moments are not only educational; they are restorative. They allow for the reassertion of self-outside the carceral label and provide glimpses of what education might look like if it were centred on humanity, not control.

5.4 Comparative Analysis and Discussion

The comparison of curriculum design and pedagogical approaches reveals distinct patterns shaped by the underlying justice philosophies of each nation. In punitive models (Ireland and England), curriculum often serves an instrumental function, focusing on quantifiable skills and behavioral modification. This aligns with Foucault's (1978) biopolitical management of populations, where education is a tool for risk reduction and economic productivity rather than holistic human development. Pedagogies tend to be traditional and didactic, reinforcing the disciplinary power of the institution by limiting learner agency and critical reflection. This "banking concept" of education (Freire, 1970) contributes to a hegemonic acceptance of punitive norms (Gramsci, 1971), where education is presented as a privilege to earn release rather than a right to facilitate growth. The limited scope for learner input or diverse subjects can also inadvertently perpetuate disadvantage by failing to address the complex social and personal needs of incarcerated individuals.

Conversely, restorative models (Norway and New Zealand) demonstrate a commitment to education as a human right, manifest in comprehensive, holistic curricula and student centered, dialogical pedagogies. Norway's approach, with its broad academic offerings and emphasis on

‘normality’, actively cultivates Freirean critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) and hooksian engaged learning (hooks, 1994). New Zealand's focus on culturally responsive curricula and collaborative learning reflects a similar dedication to learner agency and well-being.

The integration of organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971) in these contexts further empowers learners, challenging traditional knowledge hierarchies and creating counter-hegemonic spaces for authentic transformation. These pedagogical choices reflect a fundamental shift in purpose: from controlling individuals to empowering them to become active, critical citizens capable of successful reintegration.

The differences in curriculum breadth and pedagogical freedom directly impact the potential for transformative learning. Where punitive systems limit curriculum and enforce rigid pedagogies, they reinforce the 'docile body' and struggle to address the root causes of re-offending. Where restorative systems offer diverse curricula and promote active, dialogical learning, they foster critical consciousness, agency, and the development of a positive self-identity, contributing to the reduction of reputational overruling and sensationalised stigma by enabling individuals to build new, respected identities.

5.5 Policy Recommendations: Education as Restoration, Not Risk Management

The comparative analysis of punitive and restorative justice models presented throughout this thesis reveals a stark divergence in how education is positioned within carceral systems. In Ireland and England, education remains tethered to risk management frameworks, offered conditionally, inconsistently, and often instrumentalised for behavioural compliance or employability. In contrast, systems in Norway and New Zealand approach education as a right central to identity restoration and community reintegration.

Drawing from these findings, and grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Foucault, Freire, Gramsci, and transformative learning, this section outlines policy recommendations to reimagine prison education as a site of restoration rather than surveillance.

Enshrine Access to Third-Level Education in Prison as a Legal Right

Too often, access to higher education in prison is seen as a privilege contingent on good behaviour, sentence length, or institutional capacity. This framing fundamentally undermines the humanising and rehabilitative potential of learning. Policymakers should move toward recognising third-level education as a legal entitlement for incarcerated individuals. This shift would align Ireland and the UK with the European Prison Rules (Council of Europe, 2020), which advocate for equal access to education that mirrors provision in the community.

Moreover, legal recognition would compel adequate funding, qualified staffing, and infrastructural support, including digital access and academic advising. Institutions such as the Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) have already called for this right-based approach, especially in light of digital inequality that intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic (IPRT, 2021). Such a policy would also signal a fundamental shift in carceral values, from containment to capacity to build.

2. Integrate Trauma-Informed and Restorative Pedagogies Across Prison Education

As highlighted in Chapters 2 and 3, punitive education systems often ignore the psychological realities of incarceration, trauma, shame, and institutionalisation. Adopting a trauma-informed, restorative pedagogy, grounded in the work of Freire and bell hooks, would acknowledge the emotional and relational dimensions of learning in prison. Educators must be trained not only in content delivery but in practices of emotional safety, relational trust, and cultural responsiveness.

This approach reframes the prison classroom as a site of relational repair. It requires a fundamental pedagogical shift: from performance-driven, outcome-focused teaching to one that embraces vulnerability, dialogical exploration, and critical reflection. In doing so, education becomes not just rehabilitative but reparative, enabling learners to process their histories and imagine futures not defined by their convictions.

3. Eliminate Structural Barriers to Post-Release Educational Continuity

Many incarcerated learners experience an abrupt disruption in their academic journey upon release. Whether due to stigma, financial barriers, or bureaucratic inertia, the transition to community-based education is often fractured. Policies must ensure seamless progression from prison-based education to higher education institutions, including:

- Pre-release educational planning and course credit transfer.
- Dedicated post-release education liaison officers.
- Scholarships or fee waivers for formerly incarcerated learners.
- Protection against discrimination in admissions policies.

This continuum would address the reputational harm associated with the “activated gaze” by validating the learner’s academic identity and reducing the psychological divide between prison and society.

4. Reframe Prison Education as a Community Investment, Not an Individual Privilege

Public discourse often characterises prison education as an optional or even indulgent initiative. This narrow framing misses the broader social return on investment that education provides in terms of reduced recidivism, enhanced civic participation, and improved intergenerational outcomes. Government messaging and penal policy must move toward reframing prison education as a societal good a form of preventative justice that builds human capital and community resilience.

This also entails involving communities and third-sector organisations in educational delivery and reintegration planning. Initiatives like the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme or the Mountjoy-Dublin City University partnership (in Ireland) exemplify how universities and communities can collaborate in meaningful, sustained ways. Scaling such models would reinforce the view that education in prison is not peripheral, but fundamental to social repair.

Create Independent Oversight Mechanisms for Educational Equity in Prisons

To ensure these recommendations are implemented with integrity, there must be independent monitoring bodies tasked with evaluating educational provision, equity of access, learner outcomes, and institutional accountability. These bodies should include formerly incarcerated voices and community educators to counterbalance the traditional dominance of penal administrators.

Regular auditing, learner feedback mechanisms, and transparent data reporting would help prevent the slide into tokenism or compliance-based models. Oversight mechanisms should also examine whether educational content supports critical consciousness, cultural relevance, and identity affirmation, key indicators of a transformative approach.

5.6 Conclusion: Pedagogy as a Pathway to Liberation or Control

This chapter has highlighted how curriculum design and pedagogical approaches serve as crucial indicators of a carceral system's underlying justice philosophy. Punitive models, prevalent in Ireland and England, tend to offer fragmented, vocational curricula delivered through traditional, control-oriented pedagogies, thereby perpetuating the disciplinary function of the prison. In contrast, restorative models in Norway and New Zealand embrace comprehensive, holistic curricula and student-centred, dialogical pedagogies that empower learners and foster genuine critical consciousness.

The analysis underscores that the choice of 'what' and 'how' to teach is not merely an administrative detail but a profound ideological statement with significant implications for the lives of incarcerated individuals and their potential for successful reintegration. A curriculum that prioritises human rights and a pedagogy that promotes agency and dialogue are essential for moving beyond mere incapacitation towards true rehabilitation and societal transformation. The next chapter will further explore the impact of these divergent approaches on post-release reintegration and recidivism rates. The pedagogical landscape reveals how the activated gaze is embedded in classroom power dynamics, particularly when education is framed as a form of

behavioral control. A trauma-informed, dialogical approach interrupts this surveillance logic and instead promotes restoration and agency.

While the previous chapters have examined pedagogical approaches and their capacity to disrupt disciplinary power within prison walls, the implications of this learning extend far beyond institutional settings. The following chapter shifts focus to reintegration, where the long-term effects of critical, restorative, and trauma-informed education manifest in learners' identities, relationships, and social participation post-release.

6: Comparative Analysis: Post-Release Reintegration and Recidivism

6.1 Introduction: From Carceral Walls to Societal Realities

This chapter extends the comparative analysis by examining the ultimate outcomes of differing carceral philosophies on individuals' lives post-release: their successful social reintegration and rates of recidivism. Building on Chapter 4's discussion of policy and funding, and Chapter 5's exploration of curriculum and pedagogy, this section directly addresses Research Question 3: *“How does access to higher education, as implemented in punitive versus restorative contexts, affect post-release reintegration and recidivism rates?”*

This analysis will delve into how the activated gaze, reputational overruling, and sensationised stigma significantly impede reintegration in punitive systems, while restorative approaches actively work to mitigate these pervasive challenges, contributing to markedly different re-offending trajectories.

6.2 Punitive Models: Fragmented Reintegration and High Recidivism in Ireland and England

In punitive carceral models, the focus on control and limited, instrumental education often leads to significant challenges for individuals attempting to reintegrate into society. The pervasive nature of collateral consequences, exacerbated by societal stigma, results in fragmented reintegration pathways and persistently high rates of recidivism.

Ireland: Systemic Barriers and Recurrent Offending

Despite rhetorical commitments to rehabilitation, Ireland's system, characterised by fragmented educational provision and a lack of comprehensive post-release support, contributes to a high rate of recidivism. Official statistics indicate that over 60 per cent of released Irish prisoners re-offend

within three years (CSO, 2023). This high rate can be directly attributed to a confluence of factors that actively undermine successful reintegration.

The limited scope and traditional pedagogy of prison education in Ireland mean that many individuals are not equipped with the critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) or holistic skills necessary to navigate the complex challenges of post-release life. Crucially, the activated gaze is a pervasive experience for formerly incarcerated individuals in Ireland. Upon release, they face an ingrained vigilance against society's gatekeepers, with a constant, albeit sporadic, fear of their past being discovered and judged.

This fear is not merely psychological; it is fueled by systemic collateral consequences (Corda, 2023) that impede access to employment, housing, and further education. Reputational overruling becomes a lived reality, where their criminal conviction consistently supersedes any personal growth or educational achievements, invalidating their reformed identity. This is often intensified by sensationalised stigma, particularly in a digitally connected society where past offenses can be easily sensationalized and accessed, creating significant barriers to employment and housing (Irish Prison Service, 2022). Without robust, holistic support systems or "Clean Slate" legislation, individuals are often caught in a cycle of disadvantage and exclusion, leading back to crime.

England: Post-Release Challenges and Persistent Re-offending

England's approach, while varied, also demonstrates significant challenges in post-release reintegration, contributing to substantial recidivism rates (Ministry of Justice, 2013). While vocational training is offered, the instrumental nature of the curriculum and the outcomes-focused pedagogy (Ministry of Justice, 2013) often fail to address the underlying social and psychological factors contributing to offending.

The experience of the activated gaze is similarly acute in England. Formerly incarcerated individuals consistently report an internalised vigilance against the constant threat of their past being exposed and judged. This leads to profound instances of reputational overruling, where a

criminal record eclipses all other aspects of their identity, directly hindering their ability to secure stable employment, safe housing, or reintegrate into their communities. The prevalence of sensationalised stigma through media portrayal further exacerbates these challenges, ensuring that public perception often remains fixated on their criminal past, regardless of their efforts towards rehabilitation.

The lack of integrated, consistent “through-the-gate” support, and the enduring impact of numerous collateral consequences, mean that many individuals struggle to maintain pro-social lives, contributing to persistent re-offending patterns (Prison Reform Trust, 2021). The disciplinary power of the carceral system (Foucault, 1977) extends beyond the prison walls through these social and systemic mechanisms, creating a form of “civil death” (Corda, 2023) that actively prevents genuine reintegration.

6.3 Restorative Models: Supported Reintegration and Lower Recidivism in Norway and New Zealand

In stark contrast, restorative justice models prioritise comprehensive reintegration and actively work to dismantle systemic barriers, leading to significantly lower recidivism rates. Their human rights-based educational philosophies underpin robust post-release support.

Norway: Seamless Transitions and Societal normalisation

Norway’s correctional philosophy, centered on “normality” and reintegration, results in remarkably low recidivism rates, consistently below 20 percent (Kristoffersen 2022). This success is directly linked to its holistic approach to education and post-release support. The comprehensive and mainstream equivalent prison education curriculum (Pratt, 2008) ensures that individuals leave prison with recognised qualifications and a strong sense of self-worth and agency (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994).

Crucially, the impact of the activated gaze is significantly mitigated in Norway. While individuals may still be aware of their past, the societal commitment to normalisation and reintegration, coupled with robust “Clean Slate” policies, reduces the fear of sporadic, episodic judgment. Reputational overruling is less pervasive because the policy framework actively supports the overriding of past criminal records through legal mechanisms and societal attitudes that prioritise rehabilitation. The societal climate actively works against sensationalised stigma, promoting a more nuanced understanding of individuals with criminal records and reducing their constant public re-traumatisation. Post-release, individuals benefit from strong social welfare systems, guaranteed access to housing and employment support, and continued educational opportunities.

The consistent integration of organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971) in the broader correctional and social services further fosters a supportive environment, challenging societal stigmas and building bridges for successful reintegration. This creates pathways that genuinely counter the mechanisms of “civil death”.

New Zealand: Holistic Support and Cultural Reconnection

New Zealand's evolving restorative justice framework, with its emphasis on “*manaakitanga*” and “*whanaungatanga*”, demonstrates a growing commitment to reducing recidivism through holistic reintegration support. While precise comparative recidivism rates can vary based on definitions, New Zealand's focus on culturally responsive education and through-the-gate support shows positive trends in reducing re-offending for those who engage with these programs (Te Ara Tika, 2020).

The curriculum's culturally responsive design and pedagogical approaches (Te Ara Tika, 2020) help individuals, particularly Māori learners, reconnect with their identity and community, which is vital for effective reintegration. While the activated gaze and reputational overruling may still be present challenges, New Zealand's *Spent Convictions Act 2008* (Te Ara Tika, 2020) provides a crucial legal mechanism to reduce the enduring impact of a criminal record, allowing individuals to move beyond their past in certain contexts.

This directly counters the structural elements of “civil death”. Furthermore, the growing emphasis on community-based restorative justice practices and the inclusion of individuals with lived experience contribute to challenging sensationalised stigma, fostering a more empathetic societal response and creating spaces for genuine reconciliation and reintegration (Gramsci, 1971). Dedicated reintegration services, links to iwi (tribal) support networks, and ongoing educational guidance aim to provide comprehensive support upon release, bridging the gap between incarceration and community life.

Higher Education as Identity Transformation

While vocational training and basic literacy programmes fulfil immediate institutional aims, they often do so through a lens of behavioural management and risk mitigation.

In contrast, access to higher education within restorative systems allows individuals to move beyond the narrow identities imposed upon them. It reframes them not as “offenders” in need of correction, but as “students” capable of intellectual engagement, creativity, and critical inquiry.

For individuals who have experienced incarceration, this shift in identity is profound. Many describe the process of studying at a university level as a chance to re-author their personal narrative. In place of a state-assigned label, education invites a new definition of self, one grounded in autonomy, reflection, and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. The academic space becomes more than a classroom; it becomes a site of reinvention. Yet, even this space is not free from contradiction. Some formerly incarcerated learners report feelings of support and inclusion in higher education settings, while others encounter quiet resistance. Once their background becomes known, distance may emerge, through institutional processes, subtle stigma, or reputational filtering. These barriers, even when informal, send a signal that the student’s transformation is conditional, fragile, or incomplete. Education ceases to be a transaction and becomes a relational, emotional, and transformative experience, one that is both deeply personal and politically significant.

Empirical evidence strongly supports this shift. Studies consistently show that access to higher education reduces recidivism, enhances emotional resilience, and builds community connection (Linton, 2019; Frost and Travis, 2003). But beyond measurable outcomes, what matters most is the reclamation of dignity. Higher education allows for the reconstitution of identity, not as a fragile post-carceral repair, but as a confident claim to intellectual and civic belonging.

6.4 Comparative Analysis and Discussion

It is important to note that the recidivism statistics cited reflect differing reporting periods, Norway's rate is based on a two-year follow-up, whereas Ireland's uses a three-year reconviction timeframe. This distinction necessitates caution in direct numerical comparison, though broader trends and systemic differences remain clear.

The contrasting outcomes in post-release reintegration and recidivism rates between punitive and restorative models provide compelling evidence for the impact of their underlying philosophies. In Ireland and England, the punitive focus on incapacitation and limited, instrumental education contributes to persistently high recidivism rates. Here, the activated gaze is a daily lived reality, where formerly incarcerated individuals are perpetually vigilant against the sporadic "flare-ups" of judgment and exclusion driven by past offenses.

This vigilance is structurally reinforced by pervasive collateral consequences, leading to significant reputational overruling, where the criminal record consistently overshadows all efforts at rehabilitation. The media's role in sensationalised stigma further entrenches negative public perceptions, actively preventing genuine social acceptance and perpetuating a cycle of "civil death" (Corda, 2023). The disciplinary power of the carceral system (Foucault, 1977) thus extends far beyond release, continuously shaping identity and limiting opportunities.

Conversely, Norway and New Zealand demonstrate that a rights-based, restorative approach, underpinned by comprehensive education, significantly reduces recidivism. In these contexts, policies actively work to dismantle the structural supports for the activated gaze and reputational overruling. Through “Clean Slate” legislation (Te Ara Tika, 2020) and a societal commitment to normalisation (Pratt, 2008), the capacity for past criminal records to permanently define an individual is greatly diminished.

The proactive challenging of sensationalised stigma through public education and community engagement helps foster an environment conducive to genuine second chances. By fostering critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) and providing holistic support (hooks, 1994), these systems empower individuals to redefine their identities, actively counteracting the mechanisms of civil death. The integration of organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971) further champions these transformative pathways, demonstrating successful reintegration and challenging prevailing negative narratives.

6.5 Conclusion: The Transformative Power of Reintegration

This chapter has demonstrated that the impact of prison education on post-release reintegration and recidivism is profoundly shaped by the philosophical underpinnings of the carceral system. Punitive models, despite offering some educational opportunities, create environments where the enduring mechanisms of the activated gaze, reputational overruling, and sensationalised stigma actively hinder genuine societal reintegration, resulting in high rates of re-offending. In contrast, restorative models, through their commitment to human rights, comprehensive education, and proactive mitigation of post-release barriers, significantly reduce the impact of these stigmatising forces, leading to markedly lower recidivism.

The findings underscore that education within carceral systems is not merely about skills acquisition but about fostering identity transformation and empowering individuals to navigate and challenge societal mechanisms of exclusion. A shift towards restorative principles, which actively dismantle collateral consequences and challenge stigma, is essential for truly breaking the

cycle of incarceration and fostering safer, more equitable societies. The next chapter will explore the vital role played by organic intellectuals in advocating for and shaping these transformative educational initiatives.

Reintegration processes are often disrupted by the activated gaze, which resurfaces at critical transition points, like job seeking, housing applications, or accessing social supports. These micro-moments of stigma perpetuate cycles of exclusion under the guise of public safety. Reintegration often fails not because of personal shortcomings, but because the activated gaze is re-triggered in everyday encounters and playing for work, seeking housing, or rebuilding trust. Recognising and mitigating this hidden surveillance is essential to reducing recidivism.

7. The Vital Role of Organic Intellectuals in Carceral Education

7.1 Introduction: Reclaiming Agency and Redefining Expertise

This chapter focuses on a critical, often undervalued, dimension of transformative carceral education: the vital role of individuals with lived experience, conceptualised as organic intellectuals. Building upon the comparative analysis of policy, pedagogy, and outcomes in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, this section directly addresses Research Question 4: “*What specific roles do individuals with lived experience, conceptualised as organic intellectuals, play in shaping educational transformation and advocating for reform within carceral systems in these comparative contexts?*” Drawing primarily on Gramsci's (1971) distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals, this chapter will explore how these individuals challenge dominant carceral hegemonies, embody liberatory pedagogies, and provide indispensable insights that bridge the gap between policy and lived reality.

Their presence and contributions are particularly pronounced in restorative models, highlighting their capacity to facilitate genuine transformation and counteract the pervasive effects of the activated gaze, reputational overruling, and sensationalised stigma.

7.2 Gramscian Framework: Organic Intellectuals and Counter-Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci's (1971) concept of organic intellectuals is central to understanding the transformative potential of individuals with lived experience within carceral systems. As discussed in Chapter 2, Gramsci argued that traditional intellectuals often maintain societal hegemony by producing knowledge that reinforces existing power structures.

Organic intellectuals, however, emerge directly from the subalter classes, articulating their experiences and developing counter-hegemonic worldviews that challenge the status quo. In the context of prison education, formerly incarcerated individuals who engage in education and advocacy are quintessential organic intellectuals. They possess unique insights born from their

lived experience within carceral systems, which allows them to expose the contradictions of punitive approaches and champion genuinely rehabilitative alternatives.

7.3 The Limited Role in Punitive Models: Ireland and England

In punitive carceral systems, the role of organic intellectuals is often marginal, informal, or limited to specific, often under-resourced, initiatives. This reflects the broader hegemonic framework that prioritises control and traditional authority over lived experience and participatory approaches (Gramsci, 1971).

Ireland: Ad-Hoc Engagement and Undervalued

Expertise In Ireland, while there is a growing recognition of the value of peer-led initiatives and contributions from formerly incarcerated individuals, their formal integration into third-level prison education policy or curriculum development remains largely ad-hoc (Irish Prison Service, 2022). Engagement often occurs through non-governmental organisations or specific projects, rather than as a systemic component of the prison education service. Their expertise, particularly in navigating the complexities of post-release life and the impacts of collateral consequences, is often undervalued or not formally integrated into the educational framework.

England: Tokenism and Limited Structural Impact

In England, similar to Ireland, the involvement of formerly incarcerated individuals in shaping prison education policy or pedagogy can be inconsistent.

While there are notable examples of successful peer mentoring programs and advocacy groups led by individuals with lived experience, these initiatives often operate at the periphery of the mainstream correctional and educational systems (Prison Reform Trust, 2021).

The prevailing policy framework, which emphasises prescribed outcomes and risk management (Ministry of Justice, 2013), often leaves little structural room for the co-creation of knowledge or the integration of lived expertise on a systemic level.

7.4 The Integral Role in Restorative Models: Norway and New Zealand

In restorative justice models, organic intellectuals are recognised as integral to the success of prison education, embodying the principles of human agency, critical consciousness, and genuine reintegration. Their roles are often formalised, celebrated, and deeply embedded within the educational and correctional structures.

Norway: Institutionalised expertise and pedagogical leadership

In Norway, organic intellectuals play a formalised and highly valued role in shaping and delivering prison education. Formerly incarcerated individuals are often employed as peer mentors, counselors, and even co-teachers within prisons. Their unique lived experience is recognised as a legitimate form of expertise, essential for fostering trust, relevance, and authenticity in the learning environment (Pratt, 2008). They contribute to curriculum design, ensuring that educational content is responsive to the real-world challenges faced by incarcerated learners and is genuinely liberatory in its aims.

This institutionalisation of organic intellectuals is a direct manifestation of Norway's counter-hegemonic philosophy (Gramsci, 1971). By valuing and formally integrating their voices, the system actively challenges traditional power hierarchies and empowers those who have been subject to carceral control to become agents of transformation. Their presence helps to mitigate the activated gaze by demonstrating to current inmates that successful reintegration and identity redefinition are possible, directly confronting 'reputational overruling' through their own example of overcoming societal stigma. They facilitate Freirean problem-posing education (Freire, 1970) by providing a relatable perspective, enabling learners to critically analyse their experiences and societal structures.

Their consistent involvement actively works to dismantle sensationalised stigma by normalising narratives of successful reintegration and challenging negative public perceptions through their active, pro-social engagement.

New Zealand: Cultural Leadership and Holistic Mentorship

In New Zealand, the role of organic intellectuals, particularly Maori individuals with lived experience, is increasingly seen as fundamental to the success of culturally responsive prison education (Te Ara Tika, 2020). These individuals serve as cultural advisors, mentors, and educators, guiding programs that integrate Maori language, values, and knowledge systems. Their leadership helps to create learning environments that are culturally safe, relevant, and deeply connected to learners' identities and communities.

This approach aligns with Gramsci's (1971) concept of organic intellectuals challenging hegemony by asserting indigenous epistemologies and values within a correctional system that has historically perpetuated colonial injustices. Their involvement directly addresses the need for holistic support (hooks, 1994) and facilitates a deeper process of self-discovery and reconnection. By building bridges between incarcerated individuals and their communities, these organic intellectuals actively counteract the effects of the activated gaze and reputational overruling, fostering environments where identity can be rebuilt and social reintegration can genuinely occur. Their work directly contributes to challenging sensationalised stigma by presenting powerful narratives of resilience and cultural revitalisation, thereby demonstrating that transformative change is achievable and that the criminal record does not have to be the sole defining characteristic of an individual.

7.5 Integrative Educational Blueprint: A human-centered model

To truly reimagine prison and post-prison education, we must move beyond isolated reforms and toward a fully integrated, human-centered model one that unites critical pedagogy, restorative justice, trauma-informed care, and the insights of lived experience. A transformative model of

carceral education must be designed not as an add-on to prison routines, but as a core rehabilitative and emancipatory practice. This blueprint includes trauma-informed training for educators, integration of emotional literacy into all learning levels, and the consistent use of restorative dialogue spaces.

Crucially, pathways to accredited higher education must be embedded, not restricted by ‘risk logic.’ Educational content should foster critical consciousness, agency, and self-authorship, not mere compliance. Learning must be voluntary, relational, and scaffolded by trust. Institutional accountability should include learner feedback mechanisms and long-term reintegration support. This model reframes education not as rehabilitation in the traditional corrective sense, but as restoration of identity, dignity, and future possibility. This human-centered model recognises learners not as passive recipients of correctional instruction or as risks to be managed, but as whole people with histories, perspectives, and the capacity for transformation.

At its core, this approach rejects the reduction of the individual to a “docile body” (Foucault, 1977) or a metric on a reintegration dashboard. Instead, it embraces the full emotional and relational complexity of learning. Circle dialogue, peer mentorship, creative expression, and shared reflection become foundational not supplemental methods. These approaches encourage learners not only to acquire knowledge but to process emotion, reconnect with others, and reshape their self-understanding. In these spaces, the “activated gaze” is not eliminated, but softened by solidarity. The readiness to be judged or disbelieved begins to dissolve within an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust.

Trauma-informed education plays a central role. Many individuals in prison carry the weight of childhood adversity, state neglect, and complex trauma. When these experiences are ignored, education risks retraumatizing rather than restoring. But when pedagogical practice explicitly acknowledges trauma, emotional safety becomes a condition of learning. In this way, education moves from being a behavioral intervention to a recovery process.

Moreover, this model resists the neoliberal logic that measures success only in terms of employability or recidivism reduction. Of course, employment matters. But so too does critical thought, creative agency, and the restoration of dignity. A human-centered model values all forms of progress, not just the ones that fit easily into performance metrics. It understands that education is not merely about reintegrating people into society as it exists, but about cultivating the power to imagine what else is possible.

In this integrative vision, people with lived experience of incarceration must not only be learners, they must be recognised as organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971), whose insights can shape pedagogy, policy, and institutional culture. Their role is not tokenistic, but essential: they carry the reflective, experiential knowledge that theory alone cannot access. When they are empowered to co-create educational practice, we move from reform to transformation.

7.6 Comparative Analysis and Discussion

The contrasting roles of organic intellectuals in punitive versus restorative models underscore their profound impact on the transformative potential of prison education. In Ireland and England, the limited and often informal engagement of organic intellectuals means that their unique lived expertise, which is crucial for understanding and addressing the pervasive effects of the activated gaze, reputational overruling, and sensationalised stigma, is not systematically leveraged. This perpetuates a top-down, traditional pedagogical model (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994) that struggles to effectively challenge the carceral system's disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977) and its extensions into post-release life. The absence of formalised roles and consistent recognition often means that counter-hegemonic narratives (Gramsci, 1971) remain marginalised, hindering systemic reform and sustained positive reintegration outcomes.

Conversely, in Norway and New Zealand, the institutionalized and valued roles of organic intellectuals are central to their success. Their presence directly enables Freirean problem-posing and hooksian engaged pedagogies, fostering critical consciousness and holistic development. They act as powerful agents in mitigating the activated gaze by demonstrating successful reintegration, actively challenging reputational overruling through their own renewed identities, and dismantling

sensationalised stigma by offering alternative narratives rooted in lived experience. This formalised integration represents a direct challenge to the hegemonic control (Gramsci, 1971) of traditional carceral power, creating spaces for authentic transformation and fostering genuine pathways out of the cycle of “civil death” (Corda, 2023). Their involvement shifts the paradigm from a mere delivery model to a truly participatory and empowering educational ecosystem.

7.7 Conclusion: The Imperative of institutionalising lived experience

This chapter has demonstrated that organic intellectuals are not merely beneficiaries of prison education but indispensable agents of its transformation. Their formalised and valued roles in restorative models, exemplified by Norway and New Zealand, highlight their unique capacity to challenge prevailing punitive hegemonies, embody liberatory pedagogies, and actively counteract the pervasive societal mechanisms of exclusion, such as the activated gaze, reputational overruling, and sensationalised stigma.

The contrasting experiences in Ireland and England underscore the urgent need for systemic change that recognises and institutionalises the expertise of individuals with lived experience. By integrating organic intellectuals into all facets of prison education from policy design to curriculum development and direct delivery systems can move beyond mere compliance to genuine transformation. This shift is essential not only for improving educational outcomes and reducing recidivism but also for fundamentally reshaping societal perceptions of justice, rehabilitation, and the potential for human agency within and beyond carceral walls.

By recognising formerly incarcerated individuals as organic intellectuals, we directly challenge the activated gaze and reframe their position in society, from subjects of scrutiny to agents of structural and cultural transformation.

8: Synthesis of findings and pathways to transformation

8.1 Introduction: Integrating Insights from Comparative Analysis

This chapter synthesises the key findings from the comparative analysis presented in Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7. Having explored how punitive and restorative justice philosophies manifest in policy and funding (Chapter 4), curriculum design and pedagogical approaches (Chapter 5), post-release reintegration and recidivism rates (Chapter 6), and the role of organic intellectuals (Chapter 7), this section will draw overarching conclusions. It aims to demonstrate the cumulative impact of these interconnected elements on the “paradox of learning within walls” and to highlight the pathways that lead to genuine transformation rather than perpetuated control. This synthesis will reinforce how the original conceptual contributions, the “activated gaze,” “reputational overruling,” and “sensationalised stigma”, serve as critical lenses through which the enduring consequences of carceral systems can be understood.

8.2 Punitive Paradigms: A Cycle of Control, Stigma, and Recidivism

The comparative analysis consistently reveals that punitive carceral models, exemplified by Ireland and England, operate within a deeply entrenched framework of control and risk management. It is important to note that the recidivism statistics cited reflect differing reporting periods; Norway’s rates are based on a two-year follow-up, whereas Ireland’s and England’s figures generally use a three-year reconviction timeframe. While this limits the precision of direct numerical comparisons, the analysis focuses on broader structural trends and philosophical distinctions rather than exact statistical equivalence. This philosophy manifests across all examined dimensions, leading to a cycle that often undermines the stated goals of rehabilitation and contributes to high recidivism.

Policy and Funding as Reinforcers of Control

In Ireland and England, policy and funding decisions for prison education are typically driven by a biopolitical logic (Foucault, 1978), framing education as a conditional privilege aimed at

reducing future offending rather than an inherent human right. Funding is often fragmented, precarious, and subject to short-term outcomes, leading to inconsistent provision and limited access to higher education (Irish Prison Service, 2022; Ministry of Justice, 2013). This underinvestment and lack of robust legislative backing mean that education struggles to meaningfully challenge the dominant carceral system's disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977). The absence of comprehensive, rights-based policy reflects a hegemonic acceptance (Gramsci, 1971) of a system that prioritises public safety through incapacitation over holistic individual transformation.

Instrumental Curriculum and Didactic Pedagogy

The curriculum in punitive contexts often prioritises vocational skills and basic literacy, designed to prepare individuals for immediate employability rather than fostering critical consciousness or broader personal development (Irish Prison Service, 2022; Ministry of Justice, 2013). Pedagogical approaches tend to be traditional and teacher-centered, reinforcing the “banking concept” of education (Freire, 1970). This limits learner agency and critical reflection, inadvertently training “docile bodies” (Foucault, 1977) that conform to institutional norms rather than empowering individuals to become active subjects of their own change. The restricted scope and delivery methods fail to adequately address the complex personal and social needs of incarcerated learners, further entrenching their disadvantaged positions.

Fragmented Reintegration and Perpetuated Stigma

The culmination of these punitive policies and pedagogies is evident in the fragmented reintegration pathways and persistently high recidivism rates in Ireland (over 60 per cent within three years) and England (CSO, 2023; Ministry of Justice, 2013). Upon release, individuals from these systems face the omnipresent threat of the activated gaze, a sporadic yet intense self-surveillance triggered by the fear of their criminal past being exposed and judged. This fear is a direct result of pervasive collateral consequences (Corda, 2023) and the harsh reality of

reputational overruling, where their criminal record persistently negates their reformed identity and any educational achievements.

The role of sensationalised stigma from media and public discourse further entrenches negative perceptions, ensuring that individuals are often met with societal rejection rather than support. This effectively extends the carceral system's disciplinary power beyond prison walls, creating a debilitating state of “civil death” (Corda, 2023) that actively pushes individuals back into cycles of offending.

Marginalised Organic Intellectuals

In these punitive models, the expertise of organic intellectuals is largely marginalised or informally engaged (Irish Prison Service, 2022; Prison Reform Trust, 2021). Their unique insights into the lived experience of incarceration and reintegration, crucial for understanding and mitigating the activated gaze, reputational overruling, and sensationalised stigma, are not systematically leveraged. This lack of formal integration hinders the development of counter-hegemonic narratives (Gramsci, 1971) and perpetuates a top-down approach to education and reform, limiting the potential for genuine transformation.

8.3 Restorative Paradigms: Human Rights, Empowerment, and Reduced Recidivism

In stark contrast, restorative carceral models, as demonstrated by Norway and New Zealand, represent a fundamentally different approach grounded in human rights, dignity, and a profound commitment to genuine social reintegration. This philosophy translates into integrated policies, empowering pedagogies, and significantly more successful outcomes.

Policy and Funding as Enablers of Human Rights

Norway's system explicitly enshrines education as a human right for all, regardless of incarceration status, backed by robust, integrated state funding that ensures comparable access to mainstream

educational opportunities (Pratt, 2008). New Zealand, while evolving, demonstrates a growing commitment to transformative justice through policies that prioritise culturally responsive and reintegration-focused education (Te Ara Tika, 2020). These policy and funding decisions reflect a deliberate counter-hegemonic stance (Gramsci, 1971), where the societal value of rehabilitation and human flourishing takes precedence over purely punitive or risk-management logics.

Holistic Curriculum and Liberatory Pedagogy

Restorative models embrace comprehensive, holistic curricula that extend beyond vocational training to include arts, humanities, and critical social sciences, promoting critical thinking and personal development (Pratt, 2008). Pedagogical approaches are student centered, dialogical, and trauma-informed, actively fostering Freirean's Critical Consciousness (Freire, 1970) and hooksian engaged learning (hooks, 1994). Classrooms are designed to be safe spaces that normalise the learning experience, encouraging active participation and critical analysis of both individual experiences and broader societal structures. This empowers learners to become active subjects in their own transformative journeys.

Supported Reintegration and Stigma Mitigation

The comprehensive nature of education and post-release support in restorative models leads to significantly lower recidivism rates (e.g., Norway's consistently below 20 per cent, Pratt, 2008: Kristoffersen 2022). These systems actively work to mitigate the impact of the activated gaze through societal commitment to normalisation and “Clean Slate” policies (Te Ara Tika, 2020), which reduce the fear of episodic judgment and exposure of past records. Reputational overruling is less pervasive because legal frameworks and societal attitudes actively support the overriding of past criminal records, allowing individuals to redefine their identities. The proactive challenging of sensationalised stigma through public education and community engagement helps foster an environment conducive to genuine second chances and societal acceptance, directly countering the mechanisms of “civil death” (Corda, 2023).

Institutionalised Organic Intellectuals

A distinguishing feature of restorative models is the institutionalised and highly valued role of organic intellectuals. Formerly incarcerated individuals are formally employed as peer mentors, counselors, co-teachers, and advisors, recognised for their unique lived expertise (Pratt, 2008; Te Ara Tika, 2020). Their presence directly enables liberatory pedagogies, challenges traditional power hierarchies, and empowers current learners. They act as powerful agents in mitigating the activated gaze by demonstrating successful reintegration, actively challenging reputational overruling through their own renewed identities, and dismantling sensationalised stigma by offering alternative narratives rooted in lived experience. This formalised integration represents a direct challenge to hegemonic control (Gramsci, 1971) and fosters genuinely participatory and empowering educational ecosystems.

8.4 Overarching Insights and Theoretical Reinforcement

The comparative analysis provides compelling evidence that the success of prison education in fostering genuine rehabilitation and reducing recidivism is not merely a matter of program availability but hinges fundamentally on the underlying philosophy of justice.

Foucauldian Power in Practice: The punitive models demonstrate how disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977) extends beyond physical incarceration, shaping policies, curricula, and post-release experiences through mechanisms that foster obedience, manage risk (biopolitics/Foucault, 1978), and perpetuate “civil death” (Corda, 2023) via the “activated gaze,” “reputational overruling,” and “sensationalised stigma”.

Liberation through Pedagogy: The restorative models affirm the transformative potential of liberatory pedagogies (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). When education is approached as a human right and delivered through student-centered, dialogical methods, it fosters critical consciousness, agency, and a positive identity that significantly aids reintegration.

Counter-Hegemonic Praxis: The institutionalisation of organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971) in restorative systems is a powerful example of counter-hegemonic praxis. These individuals, by embodying and articulating alternative narratives rooted in lived experience, directly challenge the dominant punitive ideology and actively contribute to systemic change. Their presence demonstrates that true transformation requires a shift in who holds power and who defines knowledge within the carceral space.

The “paradox of learning within walls” is thus resolved not by minor adjustments to punitive systems, but by a fundamental paradigm shift towards restorative principles that recognise and uphold the human rights of incarcerated individuals. The interplay of your original concepts, the “activated gaze,” 'reputational overruling,' and sensationalised stigma provides a crucial bridge, illustrating how the abstract theories of power and liberation manifest in the tangible, lived experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals. Mitigating these pervasive social forces is as critical as reforms within prison walls for achieving successful reintegration.

8.5 Conclusion: Towards a Human Rights-Based Carceral Education

This synthesis chapter has brought together the findings from the preceding comparative analysis, demonstrating that punitive and restorative justice philosophies lead to fundamentally divergent outcomes in prison education and post-release reintegration. The evidence unequivocally points towards the superior efficacy of restorative, human rights-based models in reducing recidivism and fostering genuine transformation.

This success is directly attributable to their integrated approach to policy, curriculum, pedagogy, and, crucially, the institutionalised inclusion of organic intellectuals who actively work to dismantle the societal mechanisms of stigma and exclusion.

The insights gained underscore the imperative for systemic reform in nations like Ireland and England to move beyond control-centric approaches. The final chapter will translate these synthesised findings into concrete, actionable recommendations for policy and practice,

advocating for a fundamental paradigm shift towards a truly humanising and liberating model of carceral education globally.

9: Recommendations and Conclusion: Towards a Transformative Future for Carceral Education

9.1 Introduction: Translating Insight into Action

This thesis has critically examined the enduring paradox of learning within carceral systems, conducting a comparative analysis of punitive models (Ireland and England) and restorative models (Norway and New Zealand). Chapter 8 synthesised these findings, demonstrating unequivocally that a human rights-based, restorative philosophy leads to significantly better educational outcomes, more successful reintegration, and reduced recidivism. This final chapter translates these insights into actionable recommendations for policy and practice, advocating for a fundamental paradigm shift in how societies approach education for incarcerated individuals. It will also outline areas for future research and provide concluding remarks on the thesis's overall contribution to the discourse on carceral education and social justice.

9.2 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on the compelling evidence from restorative models and the insights from the original conceptual contributions (activated gaze, reputational overruling, and sensationalised stigma), the following comprehensive recommendations are proposed to foster a genuinely transformative and humanising approach to carceral education:

Enshrining Rights-Based Access to Education

A foundational shift is required to explicitly recognise education as a universal human right for all incarcerated individuals, equivalent to that available in mainstream society.

Legislative Mandate: Governments in punitive jurisdictions (e.g., Ireland, England) should enact explicit legislation or significantly amend existing correctional acts to legally enshrine education as a fundamental human right for most incarcerated individuals (as opposed to a minority). This should include access to all levels of education, from basic literacy to university degrees.

Dedicated and Sustained Funding: Establish robust, ring-fenced national funding mechanisms for prison education, integrated into national education budgets, rather than relying on precarious ad-hoc grants or external partnerships. This ensures stable, long-term investment in qualified educators, modern resources (e.g., secure digital learning platforms), and diverse course offerings, comparable to those available to the general population.

Standardised Access Protocols: Develop clear, transparent, and standardised protocols for assessing educational needs and facilitating access to programs across all correctional facilities, minimising regional disparities and ensuring equitable opportunities for all incarcerated learners.

Formal Partnerships: Mandate formal, funded partnerships between correctional services and mainstream universities, colleges, and vocational training providers to ensure curriculum accreditation, quality assurance, and seamless transferability of qualifications upon release.

Reforming Curriculum and Pedagogical Approaches

Curriculum design and pedagogical delivery must move away from instrumental, control-oriented approaches towards holistic, empowering, and learner-centered models.

Holistic and Diverse Curriculum: Expand curriculum offerings beyond basic literacy and vocational skills to include arts, humanities, critical social sciences, and culturally responsive programs (Te Ara Tika, 2020). The curriculum should aim to foster critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), emotional intelligence, and broad personal development, not solely employability.

Learner-Centered and Dialogical Pedagogy: Implement mandatory professional development for all prison educators in trauma-informed, restorative, and dialogical pedagogies (hooks, 1994). This includes promoting active participation, problem-posing education, collaborative learning, and fostering trusting relationships between educators and learners, moving away from didactic instruction.

Individualised Learning Plans: Develop comprehensive, individualised learning plans for all incarcerated individuals, co-designed with learners, which recognise prior learning, address

personal needs, and outline clear pathways for educational progression both inside and outside prison.

Technology Integration: Invest in secure and controlled access to appropriate educational technologies and digital learning platforms to ensure equity of access to modern learning resources and to mitigate the digital divide upon release.

Facilitating Comprehensive Reintegration Pathways

Systemic barriers to post-release reintegration must be actively dismantled, and comprehensive support provided to counteract the pervasive effects of stigma and exclusion. “Clean Slate” Legislation: Enact or expand “Clean Slate” or “Spent Convictions” legislation (Te Ara Tika, 2020) that allows individuals to formally seal or expunge certain criminal records after a specified period and demonstrated rehabilitation, significantly reducing the impact of reputational overruling and the activated gaze.

Dedicated Educational Liaison Officers: Establish dedicated, externally funded educational liaison officers or navigators who work with incarcerated individuals pre-release and post-release to manage educational transitions, connect them with community resources, and advocate for their continued learning journey.

One-Stop Reintegration Hubs: Establish and adequately fund community-based “One-Stop Reintegration Hubs” that provide comprehensive, coordinated support for formerly incarcerated individuals, including housing assistance, employment services, mental health support, and ongoing educational guidance. These hubs should actively work to counter 'sensationalised stigma' by normalising reintegration.

Pre-Release Planning and Through-the-Gate Support: Mandate robust pre-release planning that begins well in advance of release, focusing on integrated support for education, housing, employment, and social connections, ensuring a seamless transition from prison to community, directly challenging the perpetuation of “*civil death*”, (Corda, 2023).

Societal Re-education and Stigma Reduction

Addressing the activated gaze and sensationalised stigma requires a broader societal shift in perception and a concerted effort to normalise reintegration.

Media Guidelines and Public Awareness Campaigns: Develop and promote ethical media guidelines for reporting on crime and formerly incarcerated individuals, encouraging nuanced portrayals that avoid sensationalism and humanise experiences. Launch public awareness campaigns to challenge negative stereotypes and foster community understanding and acceptance of reintegration, actively combating sensationalised stigma.

Community-Based Restorative Dialogues: Facilitate and fund community-based restorative justice dialogues and initiatives that involve formerly incarcerated individuals, victims, and community members. These dialogues can foster empathy, build trust, and create pathways for genuine reconciliation and re-acceptance, directly mitigating the impact of 'reputational overruling' at a grassroots level.

Employer Incentives and Education: Implement incentives (e.g., tax breaks, grants) for businesses that employ individuals who have been formerly incarcerated. Simultaneously, conduct targeted education campaigns for employers and landlords to challenge biases and raise awareness about the benefits of hiring individuals with criminal records, thereby directly addressing the practical manifestations of the activated gaze.

Institutionalising organic intellectuals: The expertise of individuals with lived experience is an invaluable resource and must be formally integrated into all facets of carceral education and reform efforts.

Formal Roles as Educators and Mentors: Create mandated, paid, and professionalised roles for formerly incarcerated individuals as peer mentors, teaching assistants, guest lecturers, and co-designers of educational programs within prisons and community settings (Pratt, 2008; Te Ara Tika, 2020).

Representation on Policy Boards: Ensure significant representation of formerly incarcerated individuals, particularly organic intellectuals, on prison education policy boards, curriculum development committees, and advisory bodies at local and national levels. This fundamentally challenges traditional power hierarchies (Gramsci, 1971) and ensures that policy is informed by lived reality.

Professional Development and Support: Provide comprehensive professional development, ongoing mentorship, and competitive remuneration for organic intellectuals in these roles, recognising their unique contributions as legitimate forms of expertise and supporting their long-term professional growth. This represents a profound epistemic shift, validating marginalised voices as central to the creation of relevant and transformative knowledge.

9.3 Future Research Directions

While this thesis provides a comprehensive comparative analysis, several avenues for future research emerge from its limitations and insights:

Gender-Specific Pathways and Female Incarceration: While this thesis offers a detailed comparative analysis of prison education and reintegration through a constructivist, lived-experience-informed lens, it is important to acknowledge its predominantly male-oriented perspective. The data and conceptual framing largely emerge from male experiences, and as such, the findings cannot be generalised to all incarcerated populations.

Future research should focus on the experiences of incarcerated women, whose pathways into prison, access to education, trauma profiles, and reintegration challenges often differ significantly from those of men. These include higher rates of prior victimisation, caregiving responsibilities,

and gender specific stigma. Attention should also be given to gender-responsive pedagogies and the structural barriers women face within carceral settings. Exploring these dimensions, whether in the current comparative jurisdictions or elsewhere, would provide a more complete understanding of carceral education and support the development of inclusive, effective reform

Longitudinal Ethnographic Studies: Conduct long-term ethnographic research within both punitive and restorative prison education systems to gain more granular, qualitative data on the lived experiences of learners and educators, particularly focusing on the micro-level interplay of Foucauldian control and Freirean resistance within the classroom.

Impact of Digital Learning: Investigate the specific impact of integrating digital learning platforms and technologies into prison education across different national contexts, examining both opportunities (e.g., access to resources) and challenges (e.g., surveillance, digital literacy).

Intersectional Analyses: Conduct intersectional studies that explore how gender, race, ethnicity (e.g., indigenous populations in New Zealand, racialised groups in England), and other social determinants of health and inequality shape access to, experiences of, and outcomes from prison education.

Economic Impact of Restorative Education: A more detailed cost-benefit analysis comparing the long-term economic impacts of punitive versus restorative prison education models, including societal savings from reduced recidivism, increased employment, and improved public health outcomes.

Perceptions of Gatekeepers: Qualitative research directly engaging “gatekeepers” (employers, landlords, community leaders) in punitive and restorative contexts to understand their perceptions of formerly incarcerated individuals and the factors that influence their willingness to offer opportunities, shedding further light on the mechanisms of the activated gaze and reputational overruling.

9.4 Conclusion: The Thesis's Enduring Contribution

This thesis has presented a compelling argument for a fundamental re-evaluation of education within carceral systems. It demonstrates that punitive models, exemplified by Ireland and England, perpetuate Foucault's (1977) disciplinary power through ongoing surveillance and stigma, leading to high recidivism and fragmented reintegration. These systems, through policy and practice, inadvertently activate a persistent activated gaze, enforce reputational overruling, and amplify sensationalised stigma, creating a debilitating state of "*civil death*" (Corda, 2023) that actively pushes individuals back into cycles of offending.

In stark contrast, restorative models, as actualised in Norway and New Zealand, consistently demonstrate superior outcomes. They embody Freire's (1970) and hooks's (1994) visions by nurturing critical consciousness, dignity, and community, resulting in significantly lower re-offending rates. Crucially, Gramsci's (1971) organic intellectuals emerge as indispensable agents of change in these contexts, challenging hegemonic narratives and fostering authentic transformation by actively dismantling the mechanisms of stigma.

The insights from this comparative analysis underscore that the "paradox of rehabilitation" in punitive systems can only be resolved by a fundamental shift towards restorative principles that recognises education not as a conditional privilege, but as an inalienable human right. This perspective elevates the discussion beyond mere policy efficacy to one of fundamental human rights and societal transformation, positioning prison education as a critical battleground for social justice where the struggle between control and liberation reflects broader societal values and power structures. This broad framing makes the thesis's findings and recommendations relevant to a much wider audience and positions it as a significant contribution to social justice scholarship.

Achieving educational justice is not an isolated reform but a pragmatic necessity for building safer, more equitable, and more humane societies. It requires coordinated societal efforts to dismantle collateral consequences and normalise second chances, extending interventions far beyond prison walls. This thesis serves as a clarion call for researchers, policymakers, educators, and civil society

to unite in implementing its recommendations. The stakes extend far beyond the walls of prisons, concerning the very fabric of our shared humanity and the promise of a just society for all.

9.5 Final Reflections: Reimagining Justice, Education, and Human Potential

This thesis has sought to illuminate the structural failures of punitive justice models, particularly in Ireland and England, and the transformative potential embedded within restorative, education-centered approaches exemplified by Norway and New Zealand. Drawing on Foucault's critique of disciplinary power, the liberatory pedagogy of Freire and hooks, and the counter-hegemonic insights of Gramsci, the analysis has advanced original concepts such as the activated gaze and reputational overruling to expose the enduring harms of surveillance, stigma, and exclusion that persist well beyond the prison walls.

At its core, this research contends that punitive models rooted in retribution, incapacitation, and risk aversion are fundamentally ill-equipped to address the complex and intersecting challenges faced by many within the prison population. A disproportionately high number of incarcerated individuals have experienced early-life trauma, disrupted education, mental health struggles, addiction, and involvement in the care system. For these individuals, the prison system does not offer accountability or healing, it simply amplifies existing harm.

Restorative approaches, by contrast, offer a paradigm shift: one that centers education, empathy, reintegration, and relational accountability. They recognise the humanity of both the harmed and the harm-doer and frame justice not as punishment, but as the restoration of dignity, agency, and community belonging.

This is not to suggest that restorative models are a panacea. Their application may not be appropriate for all offence types or all populations, particularly where public safety and deep-seated trauma demand alternative approaches. However, the evidence presented in this thesis demonstrates that for the vast majority of the prison population, those failed by structural inequality rather than driven by intrinsic malignancy, restorative, rights-based education provides a pathway out of the cycle of exclusion.

The challenge now lies in reimagining justice systems that are not only reactive but also transformative. Systems that do not reduce individuals to their worst mistakes, but instead create the conditions for critical reflection, personal growth, and social reintegration. Education must sit at the center of this transformation, not as a tool of behavioral compliance, but as a vehicle for consciousness, resistance, and possibility.

As Ireland and other nations consider Justice Reform in the 21st century, they must reckon with the limits of punishment and the promise of restoration. Not all can be fixed through empathy alone. But without it, nothing meaningful will be fixed at all. *“It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones”* (Mandela 1994, cited in United Nations n.d.). How we treat those behind bars not only reflects our societal values but also reveals our commitment to fostering growth and transformation. It challenges our systems to recognise their role in supporting individual journeys toward positive change.

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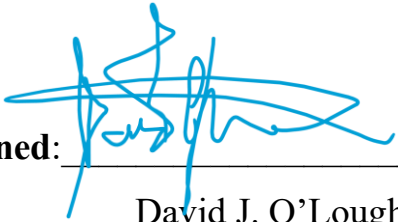
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End of Thesis

Student Declaration

- The material presented here for examination for the award of a higher degree by research has not been incorporated into a submission for another degree
- Permission is given for the thesis to be uploaded to Maynooth University Library for general access
- I am the author of this thesis, and the work described therein was carried out by myself personally.

Signed: _____

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'David J. O'Loughlin', written over a horizontal line.

David J. O'Loughlin

Date: 29/06/2025